

First Times and Second Chances

Chapter One: Godric's Hollow

He had come here for answers and some sense of peace. He didn't realize the starting place of his fame would only bring more destruction. How much violence and bloodshed could one place take? The top part of what used to be a wall of the Potter home shattered above him and he covered his head as the bits of plaster and stone rained down upon him.

"Harry, what are we going to do?" Hermione asked from his left.

"I don't know yet."

"I think we're starting to run out of time," Ron's voice came from his right. All three of them had taken cover from the Death Eaters that had launched an attack on them.

"Come out, come out, Potter!" Bellatrix Lestrange's shrill voice cut through the air. "If you surrender, perhaps we'll spare your blood traitor friends."

"Who are you kidding, Bella?" came another voice. "Leave a mudblood alive?"

Someone let out a harsh laugh. "Even I don't believe her."

"Time," Hermione said. "That's it."

"What?" Ron and Harry said at the same time.

Hermione reached into her shirt and pulled out the time turner. "McGonagall gave this to me before we left Hogwarts. She said it was most likely better protected if I kept it. If you go back two hours, Harry, make sure you stop Ron and me from coming. That's how the Death Eaters found us. They followed Ron and me."

Harry took the time turner and looped it around his neck. "Why couldn't you both come with me?"

"If Ron and I never reach Godric's Hollow neither will the Death Eaters. Just go Harry. As soon as you're gone, we'll be fine. Just hurry."

Harry gave Ron and Hermione one quick look before spinning the time turner twice. Just as he felt himself being pulled through opening of time, he heard Bellatrix's triumphant laugh above him and a bright green light filled his vision. The realization of what spell had been cast hit him the same time a rough wooden floor hit his entire body.

Looking around he found he was nowhere near Godric's Hollow. Perhaps he was dead? If he was then Hermione and Ron must be too, but neither one of them were around. Groaning, he pushed himself up on his knees and looked around. He was in a very dark room with a bare wooden floor beneath him. If he didn't know any better, he would have guessed he was in Godric's Hollow before it had been destroyed.

"What was that?"

"I don't know."

Voice drifted up through the floorboards and Harry could hear a lot of people moving around below him. Maybe he turned the time turner too many times and he was years back in the past. This was going to be very difficult if that was the case.

"Where did the noise come from?" a man's voice came, one Harry didn't recognize. He stood up and pulled his wand out, ready to defend himself if need be.

"I think it came from your room," another unfamiliar voice said, this time a woman's.

"Grab that stick, Sirius," a hoarse voice said and Harry's heart caught in his throat. The speaker was definitely Remus and the next voice was unmistakably Sirius.

"What are we going do with a broomstick handle, Remus, make them clean the house till they drop?"

"Give me this," the woman's voice came again, "before I beat you both with it."

Harry heard the floorboards creak outside the door and raised his wand. He knew Remus and Sirius were on the other side but he didn't know who else. He didn't know where he was, he didn't even know "when" he was.

"In here, this is where the sound came from," another familiar voice came, this one Harry recognized as Peter Pettigrew. If anything, at least Harry could take care of the traitor before he ever turned traitor.

"It's probably just a boggart," the woman said.

"But what if it's not?" Peter answered.

"Shut up and open the door."

"Well aren't you Mr. Sunshine tonight."

"Meri."

"Alright, James."

Harry watched as the door slowly opened, allowing pale light to slowly illuminate the room. He held his wand at the ready but the sudden light in his eyes momentarily blinded him. Blinking rapidly he tried to make out the people who filled the door way, their voices carrying into the room.

"He's got a wand," the woman said.

"How'd he get that?"

"He looks awful young."

Someone laughed. "He looks like James!"

"Who are you kid?"

Harry lowered his wand slightly. If he needed to defend himself he would have had to by now. Slowly the shapes were coming into view

but the people looked so different from what he had come to know at Remus, Sirius and Peter. They looked the same, but with some deliberate differences.

"I'm Harry Potter."

"That's impossible." A tall man pushed his way through the small crowd. Harry's breath caught in his throat and he couldn't breathe to save his life. His face was more lined and drawn. The brightness and light in his eyes that Harry's pictures had captured look like it had gone out a long time ago but the face still held it's familiarity.

"Dad?"

The hazel eyes narrowed. "What did you call me?"

Harry's arm dropped to his side. "You're James Potter, right?"

"Yes," came the cautious reply.

Harry dropped his wand, barely hearing it clatter on the floor as he made his way towards his father. "I'm Harry Potter, your son. Lily Potter was my mother." He saw his father face twitch slightly at Lily's name but other than that his face remained stony.

"I don't know what you're talking about. You better tell us who you are--"

"I just did. I'm Harry Potter, your son. Born July 31, 1980."

His father shook his head, his trademark messy black hair swinging as he did so. "That's impossible. I have no son."

"What? What about my moth--" Harry stopped himself. "What about Lily?"

"Lily was killed in June of 1980. She never gave birth to the child."

Chapter Two: Same faces, Different Time

“Are you hungry, Larry?”

“Harry.”

“Sorry. Harry?”

Harry found himself seated at the head of a kitchen table with five anxious onlookers. Well, four anxious onlookers and one very distressed father. Though Harry got the impression it was more over the fact that he had lost her than it was over seeing his “son.” There was only one woman in the house as far as Harry could tell. He thought he had heard Sirius call her “Meri” but he wasn’t certain. She looked oddly like his father, except for her eyes. They were a startling blue instead of the muddy hazel. She has been the most accommodating out of all of them. He realized she was waiting for his answer about wanting food.

“Uh, no, thank you.”

She nodded and sat down next to Peter Pettigrew who looked so different from the Peter Pettigrew that Harry knew. This man wasn’t the small, balding, rat faced man that Harry had come to know as the betrayer of his parents. This Peter was boarding on the chunky side, filling out his sharp featured face and his hair was a blonde color that was cut short and neat. He was dressed nicely, much like Uncle Vernon liked to dress on holiday and his nervous ticks were non-existent.

Sirius looked almost the same as he had in Penseive. Tall, broad shouldered with shoulder length black hair that fell gracefully in front of a face that had never been touched by Azkaban. He was dressed like a rock and roll singer with leather jacket, ripped jeans and collared shirt with the first three buttons undone. Sirius was still the epitome of cool.

Remus was completely different though. He hadn’t spoken at all since Harry first laid eyes on him and he regarded Harry with a very cool and aloof expression Harry had never seen on the man’s face before. He was still prematurely gray with lines of wear etched into his face

and patches on his clothes but there was a resigned weariness to his posture. And if Harry didn't know any better, he could have sworn he saw bitterness behind the once sparkling blue eyes.

And his father refused to even look at him.

"So," Meri spoke up when no one else did, "Where did you say were from?"

"I don't know."

"Where were you before you ended up in the room upstairs?" Sirius asked.

"I was at Godric's Hollow."

"But this is Godric's Hollow," Peter said as pandemonium broke out around the table.

"Don't tell him that!"

"They'll be sure to find us now."

"We don't know who he is!"

"Stop." The one word was spoken so softly that it amazed Harry that the other four had even heard it. His father slowly turned his head and stared at Harry. Both of them were seated at opposite ends of the table so they had a straight on view of each other. Harry merely waited for James to speak.

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

A bunch of looks were exchanged around the table but Harry ignored them.

"What were you doing before you ended up in the room upstairs?" James asked.

"Like I said before," Harry started, "I was at Godric's Hollow. Only it was just rubble. I had gone there to try to find answers about what happened the night..."

"Go on." Meri said.

"The night that you and my mother were murdered."

Once again his father's face twitched into a half wince before falling back into its normal state. "And then what?"

"Then, my two best friends showed up. They wanted to make sure that I was alright. While we were there looking through the rubble, a group of Death Eaters that had followed them there, attacked us."

"Death Eaters," Sirius practically spit out the word.

"Hermione, one of my friends, had a time turner and suggested I use it to go back two hours and stop her and Ron, my other friend, from meeting me at Godric's Hollow. So I used it but when I did the Death Eater's had found our hiding place and used the Avada Kedavra curse on us. That's the last thing I remember."

Everyone looked thoughtful, trying to figure out what had happened. Harry was at loss. Two of these people seated around the table were dead, one he didn't know, and the other two were very much alive. He couldn't be dead. He wasn't in his "world" so to speak.

"It might be possible," Meri spoke up, "That he jumped dimensions."

"This isn't Star Trek, Meri." James answered sharply.

"No, no, listen." She practically jumped out of her seat and started pacing. "He said he was hit the Avada Kedavra curse, right? Well, if he was in the middle of going back in time with the use of a Time Turner and was hit with a killing curse then it's possible he got knocked out of his time and into ours."

Sirius leaned back in his chair. "I'm not sure. I have to go with James, it does sound like something out of a science fiction novel."

Meri threw herself back into the chair and leaned close to Harry. "Tell us about where you came from."

Harry shrugged. "Like what?"

"Did you go to school?"

"Yes, at Hogwarts."

Meri nodded triumphantly. "Hogwarts was destroyed in 1983. Tell us about the people you knew. Your friends, for example."

"Well, there's Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley."

Meri turned to the others. "Ron Weasley?"

Sirius dropped the chair onto all its legs with a loud thump. "I don't remember there being a Ron Weasley, but Arthur and Molly and their kids, Bill, Charlie, Percy and the twins were around."

"Are they still around?" Harry asked, trying not to think of a world without Ron and Ginny.

Peter shook his head. "Not all of them. The twins are still alive and there's rumors their mother is but everyone else is gone."

Harry swallowed forcefully and pushed back the tears that threatened to fall. He just kept naming names and listened to the various voices tell him the fate of his friends and mentors.

"Dumbledore."

"Dead."

"McMonagall."

"Dead."

"Hagrid."

"Missing."

“Mad Eye Moody.”

“Dead.”

“Tonks.”

“Alive.”

“Shacklebolt.”

“Alive.”

“Alice and Frank Longbottom.”

“Missing. Their son is dead.”

“Fudge.”

No one answered him so he elaborated. “He was the Minister of Magic, but Rufus Scrimgeour is the current one.”

“Well that explains it,” Remus spoke up. “The Ministry’s been gone for twenty years.”

“Then who runs the magical world?” Harry asked.

“Who else?” Remus answered, his voice laced with bitterness. “Voldemort and all his followers.”

Harry felt his mouth go dry. “Voldemort is ruling the magical world?”

“I’m afraid so,” Meri answered. She motioned around the table. “Except for those who are missing or still alive in hiding, we are all that stand between Voldemort and muggles.”

“What about Severus Snape?” Harry asked, wondering what this version of Snape was like. No sooner had the name been out of Harry’s mouth then his father’s hand came down loudly on the table. The noise startled everyone but James had left the table and retreated upstairs where they heard a door slam. Everyone looked very uneasy but Meri continued.

“Snape is Voldemort’s right hand man. He’s also the one who turned Lily over to Voldemort. We thought-“ Meri’s voice cracked and she quickly looked away from Harry.

Sirius cleared his throat. “We thought that he was on our side. He offered to act as a spy because his close school friend, Lucius Malfoy vouched for Snape’s allegiance to Voldemort. Snape told us he could pass information to us from Voldemort’s camp. When Voldemort figured out something wasn’t right, he demanded that Snape prove his allegiance or die. The proof was handing over Lily Potter.”

“I think that’s enough for tonight,” Meri spoke up. “I’ll do more research though, but I think it’s best to assume that you got yourself knocked into another timeline. If it’s possible, then maybe there’s a way to get you back home. I think we all need a good night’s sleep on it though.”

Harry followed her lead and stood up from the table as the three men followed suit. Peter gave him a half nod and brief smile before leaving the room. Remus didn’t even look at him. Meri turned to Sirius who was still standing by his chair.

“Sirius, do you think you could share your room with Harry?”

“Absolutely,” he nodded with a big grin.

Meri nodded. “Good. I’ll go try to talk to James then.”

Harry looked up at the woman and was surprised to find her slightly taller than himself. “Who are you exactly?”

She laughed briefly. “I’m sorry. I’m Meriam Potter, I’m James’ younger sister.”

Harry nodded, making a mental note to look for his unknown aunt when he returned to his world. If he ever returned. He followed Sirius out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Half way up, Sirius turned around and smiled at him.

“So, what am I like in your world?”

“You’re, uh, dead, actually.”

“Uh,” Sirius turned back around. “Well, that’s depressing. How did I die? Did I go down fighting?”

“Kind of,” Harry tried to push the image of Sirius falling through the veil out of his mind but it was something that would haunt him forever. “You fell through a veil in the Department of Mysteries.”

Sirius stopped by his bedroom door and gave Harry a shocked look. “I fell through a mysterious veil?”

“Yeah.”

Sirius opened the door and stepped through. “Well that’s just lame.”

Chapter Three: A Different Set of Problems

Meri didn't go to bed when everyone else retired to their rooms. Instead, she headed towards the small library in the basement of the house and started pulling spell books off the shelves. From a previous experience, she knew the location of every book she would need to reference. She had studied them all for many years now and realized that she wasn't about to find anything new but she had to look anyway.

Pouring over the same information she had studied not that long ago proved to be only semi-helpful. Accounts of time line jumping were usually explained away due to hallucinations, mental instability or just a very very vivid dream. No matter what book she turned to jumping dimensions just wasn't scientifically back up, even in the current wizarding journals.

A door slamming jarred her out of her thoughts and she listened for any other sound. An uneven shuffle above her head told her all she needed to know. Closing the dusty books, Meri headed up the stairs to face off with a very intoxicated werewolf. She had learned from the last few years that lycanthropy and alcohol don't mix very well. Sure enough, but the time she had reached the top of the stairs that lead directly into the kitchen, a bleary eyed Remus Lupin was sitting at the table, a bottle of fire whiskey before him.

"Morning," Meri greeted.

"Is it?" came the slurred response.

Meri reached over the table and swiped the bottle from him but even drunk, his werewolf reflexes kicked in and she soon found her hand empty, the bottle returned to it's former position. "Does it help?"

"It helps me forget."

"Really? Then why are you still drinking?"

Remus mumbled something that Meri didn't catch and thought it best to leave it go. "Why don't you let me make you some coffee and then you can go sleep for a while?"

He stared at the bottle with longing before pushing it across the table with the back of his hand. Meri grabbed the neck of it and went over the sink and dumped what was left in it, granted it wasn't much, but at least the temptation would be gone.

"Meri?"

"Yes, Remus?"

She heard the chair slide across the wooden floor and she sighed to herself, trying to busy her hands and eyes with making a pot of coffee.

"Why don't you love me?"

"I've already told you why."

"But I'm just like *him*, aren't I? I mean, we are the same."

Meri looked up from the coffee grounds. "No, you're not the same."

He leaned closer to her and she could smell the beer and fire whiskey on his breath. "I can be...I can be the same."

"Oy," a shout rang through the kitchen and thankfully Remus jumped, actually stumbled would be more appropriate, back from Meri. She breathed out a small sigh of relief as Sirius came sauntering into the kitchen and gave her a quick peck on the side of head. He picked up a coffee mug and shoved it into Remus' chest. "Find your own squeaker toy, Moony."

Meri cringed. She knew Sirius was trying to diffuse a dangerous situation but the territorial show he normally used never worked with Remus, no matter how many times Meri had tried to convince him otherwise. As if on cue, she heard the coffee mug shatter and when she turned her eyes towards where Remus had been all she saw were the shards of ceramic on the floor.

"I'll get it," Sirius said and crouched down to start picking up the pieces.

"You know better than to say things like that to him, Sirius."

“Hey,” he looked up at her through careless black bangs, his gray eyes looking like storm clouds, “he knows we’re together. He should know better than that.”

“He was drunk.”

“Why do you always make excuses for him?”

Meri turned away to hide the tears that were threatening to fall and stared at the percolating coffee. “I know what he can be.”

The broken mug fell unceremoniously into the trash. “Yeah, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.”

“What?”

Sirius opened his mouth and quickly shut it again. Meri glanced over at the doorway of the kitchen and saw Harry standing there. He looked nervously back and forth between her and Sirius.

“Am I interrupting something?” he asked.

“No,” Meri jumped in. “Have a seat. Do you want breakfast?”

“Sure.”

Meri went to open the refrigerator and Sirius cleared his throat. “What?”

“We, uh, were suppose to go shopping last night...”

“Oh, right,” Meri straightened up. “Guess we’re going out then.”

“Uh,” Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “You guys go ahead.”

“Trust us,” Sirius laughed, “when I say there’s no food in this house, there is literally, no food here.”

“That’s okay-“

“We’re paying,” Meri offered. If he was anything like his mother, and Meri had a feeling there was more Lily than James in him, he most

likely was concerned about his lack of money. Apparently, she was correct as he stood up from the table.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah," Sirius shrugged. "We'll give you a bill when you leave. No sweat."

Meri rolled her eyes and Harry laughed. She went to the bottom of the stairs and called up for James and Peter, telling them where they were going. She and Sirius stood by the door and check their watches. Before Harry could ask what was going on, Peter came running down the stairs, pulling a sweater over his head.

"Never fails," Sirius said.

"He never gives up a chance at an Irish breakfast," Meri clarified.

"Hey," Peter huffed, "I never give up a chance at a breakfast you didn't make."

"No one else complains," Meri pouted.

"Apparently, you're not listening very closely."

Meri tried to fix Sirius with a scowl but it quickly faded into a repressed smile. "Fine, let's go."

"Isn't James coming?" Sirius asked Peter and the other man shrugged his thin shoulders.

"I didn't hear anything going on in his room. I thought he was already down here."

"Well, he'll know where we'll be," Meri shrugged and opened the front door. The air was warm and moist, a typical London mid-summer day. Meri watched as Harry took everything in with wide eyed amazement. "What is it, Harry?"

"I just never thought I would see this neighborhood...you know..."

"No, we really don't," Sirius said.

Harry swallowed hard. "Intact."

"The entire neighborhood was gone where you come from?" Peter asked.

Harry nodded his head. "It's a beautiful neighborhood, though."

Meri smiled to herself. She always had enjoyed living here and rued the day that they would be forced to move. The houses along the street all housed witches and wizards who would cast security spells on a rotational basis. That's what had allowed them to stay there for so long. It definitely brought new meaning to the term "united community." No one was out this morning, not that uncommon, but Meri caught a couple faces peeking out from the curtains, no doubt wondering who the teenager was with them.

The walk to the local pub was short and thankfully, it wasn't that crowded. The bar tender waved at them when they entered and quickly came over the booth that all four of them had squeezed themselves into.

"Morning all," he greeted brightly.

"Morning," they chorused.

"Hey, your friend make it home alright last night?" he asked.

"Yeah, he did," Meri answered, as Peter didn't know what had happened and Sirius looked as if he all he wanted to do was forget. "You could have called us to get him."

"He wasn't bothering anyone. No harm done. Just wanted to make sure you saw him this morning. What'll it be then?"

Sirius had "encouraged" Peter and Harry to return back to the house while he and Meri went out grocery shopping. Harry had offered his assistance but Sirius was unmoving in his plan and thankfully, Harry saw that. So Sirius waved good bye to the two of their entourage and turned to face Meri. Unfortunately, she didn't look all that thrilled at how he had ditched the other two.

“What?”

“What was that about?”

“I wanted to be alone with you. What’s wrong with that?”

“‘Come on guys, get lost.’ That was real tactful.”

“They got the hint.”

“That’s wasn’t a hint, that was-argh, you know what, never mind.”

“See,” Sirius slipped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against his side, “I knew you would see it my way.”

“Ok, so what so important that you had to be alone with me?”

He immediately released her and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I figured you didn’t sleep at all last night because you were reviewing those dimensional books downstairs.”

“How did you know I didn’t sleep last night?”

“I listened for you. Anyway, I know you were probably looking for a way to send Harry back to his time.”

“I was, yes.”

Sirius stopped and grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to stare him in the eyes. “Are you going back with him?”

“I don’t...think so. I don’t know. I may not have a choice, Sirius.”

“And if you did have a choice?”

She reached up and placed her hands on each side of his face. “I’d stay here. This is my home and has been for almost eighteen years now.”

“Voldemort isn’t running Harry’s world.”

“All the more reason to stay here then,” Meri smiled. “Someone has to stop him, it may as well be us.”

Sirius’ face broke out in a smile, obviously relieved by Meri’s response. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders again and started walking again. “Did you bring the shopping list?”

Meri turned to him. “Didn’t you?”

“I thought you had it?”

Meri let out a strangled groan. “Sirius!”

Chapter Four: More Alike Than Not

Harry felt the onset of panic as he watched Meri and Sirius stroll off down the street, leaving him alone with Peter. Swallowing the suspicious lump that had formed in his throat, Harry turned to look at the man standing next to him. This was most certainly a different Pettigrew than the one Harry had come to know and his heart rate started to slow.

"I'm glad it's just us, Harry."

And his heart sped up again. "Why is that?"

"I heard Sirius ask last night about what his counterpart was like and it had me wondering about mine as well."

Harry's breath left him in one great whoosh. "I, uh, I really don't think you want to know."

"Am I dead?"

The immense seriousness of his tone took Harry by surprise. He had heard nothing but sniveling, begging and groveling from the other Pettigrew. He looked up at the man walking beside him for the first time since he had come. This Peter stood straight and had a confidence the other lacked. There was a quiet strength about Peter that Harry had always associated with Remus Lupin. The faces were the same here but he was starting to realize that the people behind them were not.

"Uh, no," Harry mumbled, "you're not dead."

"What am I doing then? Was there an Order of the Phoenix where you're from?"

Harry jumped on the possibility of a subject change. "Yeah, there is. It was founded when Voldermort first tried to come to power, back in the late seventies."

"Let me guess, they succeeded in beating him back."

“More or less.” Harry wasn’t sure how much to reveal to these people yet. Appearances could be deceiving and he would have figure out who to trust still. “He was more incapacitated than anything. He went into hiding for about twelve years before he started to make himself known again.”

Pettigrew looked confused for a moment. “If he was incapacitated then how much of a threat could he be?”

“He still had loyal followers who were more than helpful to him.” Harry thought bitterly about Snape and how wrong he had been in believing he was on their side. No, you couldn’t trust appearances. “Voldermort returned to his full power three years ago.”

“Let me guess, Lucius Malfoy helped him accomplish that?”

“No,” Harry took a deep breath. “You did.”

Pettigrew’s steps faltered slightly but he quickly caught himself. “Me?”

Harry nodded.

“That’s interesting. Meri will want to know that.”

“Know what?”

“Wait till we get inside.”

Harry noticed they were back on the main street of Godric’s Hollow. A couple people had ventured out of their homes but Harry could see the wariness with which they moved about and viewed the world. Everyone was an enemy until they had proved themselves otherwise. Perhaps Dumbledore would still be alive in his time if they had taken that view with Snape. Well, it didn’t really matter anymore. They knew what a traitor Snape was now, a lot of good it did Harry at the moment.

When they entered the house, silence was the only thing that greeted them. Harry couldn’t tell if that was a good or a bad thing. It was easier when at least one other person was around, Harry’s chances at having an ally were greater.

“James?” Pettigrew called out. “Remus?”

A creaky door opened upstairs and a bleary eyed Lupin gazed down at them. “What?”

“I was just seeing who was home,” Pettigrew shrugged. “James around?”

“Doubt it. I haven’t heard anything from his room.”

Pettigrew nodded and moved off into the kitchen and Harry heard the door upstairs slam shut. That was definitely not the Lupin he was used to being around. Wanting to know what Pettigrew wanted to tell Meri, Harry followed him into the kitchen. The door leading outside was standing open so Harry glanced outside and found Pettigrew sitting on the porch steps.

The backyard to the house wasn’t large at all but it was pleasantly green and well taken care of. As Harry took a seat on the grass and rested his back against the side of the house, he noticed a motorcycle propped up against the back gate.

“Is that Sirius’?” Harry asked, pointing towards the bike.

“Yeah,” Pettigrew laughed. “He had charmed once to fly. Meri used to play Quidditch quite a bit till a bludger took out her knee. She never could quite get her balance back to play again. She missed the flying around so Sirius found the charm and took her flying every now and then.”

“Don’t they go anymore?”

“They can’t. None of us can use magic out in the open. We even try to abstain from it indoors as well. It only acts as a beacon for the Death Eaters.”

“That’s why you were so shocked to see I had a wand.”

Pettigrew nodded his head slowly. “Here, carrying a wand is like wearing a large red bulls eye on your person.”

“Do you ever use magic then?”

“When we have to, usually it’s in the midst of battle.”

“But no wands.”

“No, we use wands, like I said, in battle. But since it so clearly marks you as a magic user, we try to use wandless magic as often as possible. Now you know why there’s so few of us. Those of us who could use only wands were quickly killed off. Most wizards find it easier to ignore their magical abilities instead of trying to train themselves to use it to fight.”

“There could be hundreds of other witches and wizards out there in the world that are just living as muggles to avoid confrontation with Voldemort?”

“They’re trying to keep from being killed by Voldemort.”

“They’re cowards.”

Pettigrew laughed slightly. “You sound like the your father. At least, the way he was.”

“Before my mother died?”

Pettigrew was silent for a moment before motioning out to the back of the yard. “She used to have a garden out there. She had a gift when it came to growing flowers. Roses with blooms the size of your fist. Oleander, snap dragons, lilacs that you could smell throughout the whole hollow. Did you get to know her at all in your time?”

Harry shook his head, still trying to envision his mother out in the yard planting and pruning the now dead garden. “She and my Dad were both killed shortly after I turned one.” Harry didn’t want to get into the details of that night and remembered Pettigrew still owed him some information. “What was it that you wanted to tell Meri?”

“Ah, yes, that.” Pettigrew sat up straighter. “I had a theory that I was talking to Meri about as to why there are different realities. My theory was that when we are given a choice, the moment we decide what to

do a reality breaks off from that one where the other choice plays out.”

“I don’t understand what that had to do with what I told you?”

“You said that I helped Voldermort return to his human state after he had been incapacitated?”

“Yes.” Harry shivered at the memory of that night. Watching Wormtail cut off his own hand to resurrect Voldermort.

Pettigrew sighed heavily. “I was given a choice, many years ago, to serve Voldermort or die. It was in the early days of Voldermort’s rise to power. I was walking back from meeting that was held by Dumbledore about the need to create a wizarding army of sorts.”

“The Order of the Phoenix?”

“Precisely. I was heading back to my flat after the meeting when someone grabbed me from behind. The next thing I knew, I was in a basement of sorts with three hooded people standing over me.”

Harry was listening with such rapt attention that he actually felt like he was there. The sunlight was hitting him suddenly faded and he could swear the damp scent of mold hung in the air. He could even see the skull like masks of the Death Eater staring down at him.

“They asked me if I wanted to serve Voldermort. I answered no. I don’t know how long they tortured me. A day...ten days. It didn’t matter.”

“How did you get out?”

“James and Sirius came looking for me. I was in the basement of the building where my flat was located. They hadn’t seen me for a day and the full moon was rising that night and they wondered where I was. I was almost dead when they found me but I had held out. The sad thing was, I wasn’t the only one that they had taken that night. I was by far the luckiest.”

“Who else did they take?”

“Some who are now Voldemort’s most trusted. I believe Snape may have been one of them. A man by the name of Goyle and his neighbor Grabbe. Others that choose to side with Dumbledore died after hours of torture similar to what I went through. Alice and Frank Longbottom were the first I heard about. They had just been married. Arthur Weasley was another. And then, of course, Meri.”

“Meri was taken?”

Pettigrew looked down at his hands. “It was horrible, from how they described what happened to her. She had been missing for sixteen days and when we found her, she couldn’t have been dead more than a few hours.”

“Wait, you said she was dead when you found her.”

“Yeah?”

“Then who’s the woman that’s living here?”

Pettigrew’s eyes grew wide. “I thought she would have told you by now.”

“Told me what?”

“The Meriam Potter that’s living here now is from another time as well. We’re actually all wondering if you may come from the same time.”

Chapter Five: A Look to the Past

"You told him!"

Harry tried to bury his face into his book and block out his new found Aunt's screams. Apparently, she had been none too happy with Pettigrew, *Peter*, Harry reminded himself, for telling Harry about her origin in his time. One look at her face and Sirius and Harry both fled down to the basement and tried to busy themselves with books.

"Bloody hell," was muttered and Harry looked up to see Lupin coming down the stairs. "What's all the yelling about?"

Sirius looked unusually sullen. "Peter told Harry about Meri."

Lupin shrugged his shoulders. "What about her?"

"How she's not from our time."

"Oh."

Harry looked over the top of book and took notice of Lupin. Last night he had been wearing a jumper but today he was dressed in a T-shirt which revealed the sorry state of him. He was extremely thin. It looked as if his clothes were hanging on a skeleton. His face was sallow and ill looking. Lines of a hard life were etched into his skin and standing next to Sirius, who was sprawled out on the couch, he looked to be ten years Sirius' senior.

"I'm going out then," Lupin said.

"Fine," was Sirius' response.

Harry watched in amazement as Lupin went back up the stairs. The coldness and indifference between the two men was just another difference that sent Harry reeling. All he could remember is that moment in the Shrieking Shack when he had witnessed that joyous reunion of two friends.

"What's a matter, Harry?"

“Oh, uh, nothing.”

Sirius shut his book and sat up. “You look like someone just shattered your dream. I guess I would be a little down myself if I was taken out of my world.”

“It’s so different here, that’s all.”

“Lupin’s really different, isn’t he?”

The question took Harry off guard. He wondered if Sirius was a legitamins and he never knew that about his godfather. “What makes you ask that?”

“Meri used to talk about him a lot when she first got here. She never outright said it, but I had the feeling she had been in love Remus, from her time. The difference between the two left her very shocked and hurt for the first few months she was here. It took her a while to open up to us but eventually she did.”

“And then she fell in love with you.”

Sirius gave him a lopsided grin. “I should hope so. It would really bother me if she’s just settling. But now Remus has his hackles up after sixteen years of having a chance to get his life together and pursue her himself. He had his chance.”

“So are you and Meri married then?”

“Not yet and not from lack of trying on my part,” Sirius looked up at the stairs. “She says she’s concerned about James, doesn’t want to bring up bad memories for him and all that.”

“You don’t believe her?”

“It’s been seventeen years, Harry. Would you believe her?”

Harry shook his head. “How long have you been together then?”

“A couple years now,” Sirius leaned back on the couch. “Maybe she’s just not ready yet and it’s as simple as that.”

“Unbelievable! Idiots, the whole lot of you!”

Meri's shout carried down the stairs and Sirius turned to Harry with a wide grin. “How can you not love that woman?”

The door that had separated them from the arguing Meri and Peter finally opened and Meri came down the stairs. Her sharp featured face was still flushed with anger.

“Harry, you have my sincerest apologies. I had wanted to talk to you more at length about your time before I said anything.”

Harry shrugged. “That's fine.”

“Anything left of Peter up there?”

Meri scowled at Sirius but Harry could see a hint of humor in her eyes.

Harry closed the book he had been trying to read and set it on the table in front of him. “So, how can you tell if I'm from your time or not?”

“Just basic comparison really,” Meri sat down next to Sirius on the couch. “For starters, in my time, you had been born. Did you ever find out if your father and his knucklehead friends ever had nick names for themselves?”

“Yes, they did.”

“When I got here, I found out they had never renamed themselves.”

Sirius shrugged. “We never had a need to rename ourselves.”

Meri looked at Harry forlornly. “There was never a Marauders map here. Anyway, their nicknames from my time were Prongs, Padfoot, Moony and Wormtail.”

Harry nodded. “That's what they were named in my time as well. And there is a Marauder's map.”

Meri rubbed her eyes. “It's not a definite way to tell for certain but that's about all the similarities I can come up with.”

“Well, uh, how did you get here?”

Meri sat up straighter. “I suppose you would like to know that.” She stood up and walked over to a bookcase that situated in a dark corner. Harry watched as she set a small stone bowl on the desk that was on the other side of the room. He didn’t even have to see the rune markings on it to realize it was a pensieve. It was slightly smaller than the one in Dumbledore’s office but it still held that strange, not quite liquid material.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Sirius came up behind Harry.

“It doesn’t take much magic to do this,” Meri replied. Harry noticed she was holding a wand. “There’s no other way to do this. Maybe I’ll see something new this time.”

Harry watched Sirius’ face and was surprised to see a look skepticism and disappointment. After a few tense seconds, he finally nodded and sat down in the desk chair. Meri touched the wand to her temple and withdrew a long silverly thread that dropped into the pensieve.

“Ready, Harry?”

He nodded briefly and leaned over the bowl. It wasn’t long before he was tumbling down into cool night air and his feet hit pavement. Looking around, he found himself standing on the main street of Godric’s Hollow. It looked much like the Godric’s Hollow he had seen in the time he was trapped in. It looked to be the dead of night and sometime around the fall as some of the leaves had started to change colors.

“Alright then, Harry?”

He looked up to see his Aunt standing next to him. “Yeah. Where are we?”

“Godric’s Hollow. Only, this is the time that I came from. You’ll see me soon.” She pointed down the sidewalk and Harry stared at the shadows until a figure appeared. It was definitely Meri, only with long hair and an unlined face. She was dressed in a jumper, jeans and

sneakers and was running full tilt down the sidewalk. As she ran past Harry, he could hear her repeating

“I’m too late, no no no, I’m too late.”

Harry turned and saw smoke rising up between two of the houses and realized what night this must have been. He took off after the retreating figure of the young Meri and turned the corner to see what was his parent’s house in shambles. The young Meri was standing at the edge of the rubble, shock written all over her young features.

“I couldn’t believe what I was seeing,” the older Meri said, coming to stand next to Harry. “I had just been told that Peter Pettigrew had sided with Voldemort and I knew that James and Lily were going to be the first targets. I couldn’t believe that I didn’t make it in time.”

A baby’s cry pierced the night, startling Harry. Apparently it was enough to launch the young Meri into action. She scrambled over the blocks of concrete and wood, throwing them aside, yelling Harry’s name. She had almost reached the center of the debris when a red light knocked her back and sent her skidding across the pavement.

Harry turned to see Bellatrix Lestrange stepping over the debris. She wasn’t as gaunt as he had come to know her though she was still as wild-eyed.

“What did you do to the Dark Lord!” she screamed at Meri as the younger woman was struggling to get to her feet. No sooner did Meri stand up than Bellatrix hexed her again. Harry averted his eyes and waited to hear the thump of a body hitting the ground again but it didn’t come. He lowered his arm and watched as Meri had sent a spell in Bellatrix’s direction and now the two charms were working against each other, much like Harry’s and Voldemort’s did in the graveyard.

The crackle of magic in the air was so great that Harry didn’t even hear the sound of the approaching motorcycle. It was as if Sirius had just appeared out of no where but Harry noticed the bike laying discarded in the middle of the street. A yellow light jumped out of Sirius’ wand and knocked Bellatrix back. Harry watched in silence as

the other Death Eaters slowly sunk away into the night now that their leader was unconscious.

It didn't take Meri and Sirius long to start scrambling over the rubble again. They were both crying out Harry's name. Finally, Meri disappeared from sight and stood up with a squirming bundle in her arms.

"Sirius, look at this."

The young version of his godfather hopped across the debris and peered over Meri's shoulder. "What is that?"

Meri shook her head and placed the tip of her finger on the baby's forehead. "It looks like a scar."

"Do you know what it means?"

"I think so but I want to be certain before I voice anything."

Harry watched as Sirius held onto Meri's arm as they maneuvered their way through the destruction. Harry could see the tears that were running down Meri's face. Once on the street, she turned and looked back at the rubble.

"We're, uh, we're going to have to," her voice quavered, "to dig them out."

"Remus and I will take care of that."

Harry went to ask where Remus was that night but the older Meri pointed up to the sky. There was a full moon shining down. Sirius went and picked up the motorcycle. Harry could see scratches on the black paint from where he was standing but Sirius didn't even take notice.

"We can't stay here," he said, swinging his leg over the machine. "We've got to get him someplace safe."

"Wait!"

Harry jumped at the thundered exclamation. He could see the massive form of Hagrid running down the street towards them. He came to an abrupt stop when the ruins came into view. The half giant's mouth worked but no sound was coming out. Meri, still cradling the baby walked over and patted Hagrid's arm with her free hand.

"Say it ain't true."

Meri sadly shook her head. "Sirius and I are Harry's godparent's. We need to get him someplace safe. If you could tell Dumbledore-"

"About that," Hagrid looked down at his hands. "He uh, sent me to git baby Harry."

"Get him?" Sirius had left his bike and came to stand by Meri. "What do you mean 'get him?'"

"Dumbledore thinks Harry will be safest with his Aunt."

Meri gave him an incredulous look.

"His other aunt."

Sirius burst out laughing but it actually hurt Harry's ears. There was no humor in it whatsoever. "Muggles? Muggles can protect him better than us?"

"Dumbledore's a great wizard," Hagrid was starting to get angry and Meri laid a hand on his arm again.

"We're not doubting that, Hagrid." She turned to Sirius. "Dumbledore may have the right idea."

"What?"

"It all depends on how," she swallowed convulsively, "how they died. If James was surprised and just killed, then he wouldn't have had a chance to cast a protection charm. I'm thinking that Dumbledore knows something we don't. If Lily willingly died for Harry then yes, he

would be safest at his muggle's Aunt's home." Reluctantly, she slowly handed the bundle over to Hagrid. "Make sure he gets there safely."

Hagrid nodded solemnly.

"Here," Sirius rolled the motorcycle towards the giant. "This should get you there quick enough. If you fly high enough, no one will see you. Even if there are more Death Eaters out there, they won't be able to catch you on this."

"But-

"Give it to Harry when he comes of age," Sirius told him.

Harry watched as Hagrid nestled the bundle in a type of sling he already had draped across his chest before sitting on the bike. He kicked it to life and soon sped off into the night, leaving Meri and Sirius standing in the middle of the street.

"We need to find Pettigrew before he betrays anyone else tonight," Sirius said.

"Where do we start looking?"

"Meet me at the Leaky Caldron in about an hour. I'll go ask around the usually rat holes and see what I can't come up with. Why don't you go check on Remus. I'd like to have all this wrapped up before he changes in the morning."

Meri nodded. "Leaky Caldron in an hour."

Sirius apparated with a loud "pop" and Meri slowly turned back to look at the house, or what remained of it. She took a steadying breath and closed her eyes. Harry caught a slight movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to see Bellatrix, furious and with up lifted wand. The words "Avada Kedavra" were spit out with such hatred it turned Harry's blood cold. The green light hit Meri just as soon as the "pop" occurred. When the flash faded from view, there was no one in the street.

Before Harry could register everything that had happened, the world was spinning and tilting and he soon found himself standing next to the pensieve in the alternate time dimension he had found himself currently occupying. It took him a minute to get his bearings straight again.

“Well?” Sirius asked.

“Apparently,” Meri said as she put the pensieve back on the shelf, “anytime we do something that transports ourselves to another place or time, like using a time turner or apparating, we run the risk of being knocked into another time. Most likely that’s due to the Avada Kedavra curse. But once again, I only have my experience and Harry’s to go by.”

“Any thing to help you get him back?”

Meri tiredly rubbed her eyes. “No, not yet.”

Harry watched Sirius’ face closely and couldn’t help but see a gleam of relief.

Chapter Six: The Unexpected Source

Peter felt terrible about telling Harry about Meri's past. Granted, he felt even worse after her tirade that was solely directed at him. Remus had caught a bit of the yelling due to his quickly passing through the room. Apparently no one was safe from her anger. The first chance he got, Peter quickly stepped out of the room and fled upstairs when Meri had turned her back to gather more steam. That was the thing with the Potters, give them a chance and they'll keep ranting for hours.

Peter stopped by James' door for a moment before knocking. It was late in the afternoon and he felt the need to get out of the house before Meri came looking for him again. When there was no answer, Peter cautiously opened the door and found the sparse room vacant. He tried very hard to avoid James' bedroom. It was almost eerily sad and it reminded him of the feeling you would get from walking through a cemetery.

The rocker that he and Lily had bought the day they found out she was pregnant sat in the corner, dusty from not being used. The only other piece of furniture in the room was the bed, which had never been made for as long as Peter could remember. He didn't need to look in the closet to know that all Lily's clothes still hung there. Peter left the room feeling more like he needed a drink than when he first entered. He guessed that was one upside to living with an alcoholic werewolf: he always had a drinking buddy when he needed one.

He retraced his steps from this morning and walked back to the pub where they had eaten breakfast. When he stepped through the door, the scene had changed quite a bit since then. With the sun quickly disappearing below the horizon, it plunged the far corners of the pub into darkness. The early drinking crowd had filed in after work and were now either enjoying the end of another hard day's work or mourning the thought of starting another day of it.

Remus wasn't hard to find. He never was. He was usually the only one at the end of the bar with his nose in his glass and a wide ring of no one surrounding him. It seemed even in inebriated states, people realized he was dangerous even if they didn't know why. Maybe

that's why he started drinking, Peter never really knew when it started. He ordered a whiskey and sat down next Remus.

"She stop yelling?"

Peter nodded. "For now."

"What was she going on about?"

"I, uh, had told Harry about Meri being from another time as well."

"Uh, I would have thought she would have told him that already."

Peter stared at his glass. "I suppose that's what she's doing now."

Remus threw back the rest of his beer and slammed the glass back down on the bar. "Seen James at all?"

"No, not at all today. I knocked on his door to see if he wanted to come down here but he wasn't there."

"This whole son thing had him scared."

"It seems odd, doesn't it?" Peter sipped at his beer. "You would think he would be falling all over himself to get to Harry, spend time with him, you know? It just doesn't make much sense."

"Nothing makes sense."

Peter bit back a sigh and turned to face the miserable man next to him. "You're a very up person, you know that?"

"That's why I drink," he answered, motioning to the bartender to fill it up. Peter waved off the bartender.

"I think you've had enough."

"Quit thinking for me. I've been doing this longer than you and I know when I've had enough."

"Do you? Funny, I always heard that alcohol impairs your judgment."

“Not mine.”

“Of course not,” Peter gave in and watched as the frowning bartender filled the glass up again.

“How’s Sirius taking all of this?”

Peter tried to ignore the bitterness that clung to the name. “Fine, I suppose, why?”

“Meri had a chance to go home possibly. Best chance she’s had in years. I’m sure he’s just sweating right now.”

“We all are, Remus. A little more sympathy for the man couldn’t hurt matters. The same goes for James.”

“Sympathy,” he took a long drink from the foamy liquid, “sympathy is highly overrated.”

The werewolf’s attitude was starting to wear on him considerably, despite the liquor. “How about pity then? Would pity work for you?”

The other man sighed wearily. “Pity would be fine.”

“So, can we keep him?”

Meri stopped rubbing her face and peeked at Sirius from between her fingers. “What?”

Sirius motioned up the stairs where Harry had just disappeared. “Harry. Can we keep him?”

“He’s not a stray, Sirius. He’s a boy, a really important one.”

“To *his* time.”

“To my time as well. He’s the boy who lived and we need to get him back to that time so his time doesn’t turn into this one.”

“Did it ever cross your mind that this could be what our time is supposed to be like? That Voldermort was to come to power before

he was destroyed? That maybe because the Death Eaters have weeded through the weak wizards and witches, we now have a very strong army? Who's to say that won't happen in his time?"

Meri shook her head. "It couldn't happen in his time."

"Why?"

"Because he lived. Voldermort lost his power the night he tried to kill Harry. Because Harry lived, Voldermort can not become all powerful."

"Then where is our hope, Meri? The boy who lived didn't here."

"Maybe that's why he's here. To help us get the upper hand on Voldermort."

Sirius looked incredulous. "And you got your hackles up when I called him a stray. You're referring to him now as a pawn."

Meri sank down into the chair at the desk. "No, I didn't mean...I was just saying...What I meant is that because he's here, we now have hope in defeating Voldermort."

Sirius sat on the edge of the desk. "What makes him so special?"

"You've noticed the scar?"

He nodded.

"That scar is the result of Voldermort marking him as his equal. When the scar was made, Voldermort transferred some of his power into Harry. I think it would be a safe bet to say that Harry is parselmouth and it could explain the amount of magical capability he has."

"Having that kind of power, wouldn't you think it would corrupt him like it had Tom Riddle?"

"Well, yes, but Harry's has some help. His eyes are the same color as Lily's. She sacrificed herself for him that night. Because of that, the love she had for him created a type of barrier. He has the choice to use the gifts for evil but his mother's love keeps him from doing that."

Sirius' brow furrowed. "So he wasn't born with green eyes?"

Meri slowly shook her head. "He was born with the Potter hazel eyes. That was the one thing that struck me when I pulled him out of the wreckage. His eyes had gone from that muddy green to a vibrant, almost neon, green."

Silence hung between them for awhile. Meri allowed the ticking of the clock to lull her into sleepiness as Sirius processed these new revelations. She didn't know how much time had passed before Sirius broke the silence.

"He asked me about us."

"What?"

"Harry. Smart kid, he asked if we were together."

"Oh. What did you say?"

Sirius shrugged. "That we were pretty much together. Not married but--"

"Together," Meri finished for him with a smile. "Have you seen James at all?"

"Not today, no."

Meri frowned. "I would have thought we would be fighting him just to see Harry. It strikes me as very odd."

"James is odd."

She could hear the joking in his voice but there was truth behind the words. "Perhaps you could fill the role till James comes to his senses?"

"Of course. I like the kid."

"You're just happy there's someone here that's on the same maturity level as you."

"It is about time," Sirius stood up and planted a kiss on Meri's cheek. "About that being together but not married-"

"I know. Soon."

He gave her a resigned look before heading up the stairs to track down Harry. Meri waited till she heard him starting to talk before she reached for the chain that always hung around her neck. She wore it under her shirts so it wouldn't show and no one had noticed it the entire time she had been here.

She fingered the ring that hung on the thin chain and held it front of her face. It was a very simple ring, silver with Celtic etchings on the band and a small diamond in the center. It was beautiful and the sacrifice that had gone into the purchase of it had touched her deeper than realizing the etchings meant "eternal love."

But the ring wasn't from Sirius and that was why she kept it hidden. In fact, it wasn't even from this time but her previous one. She thought that seventeen years in another time would have broken the spell that the ring had on her but it didn't. The giver of the ring still had her heart though her mind had given up the hope of ever seeing him again. That was until Harry appeared and her hope of returning to Remus was renewed.

James hurried down the dark alleyway, pulling his coat closer around his body. Why was it always colder on this side of the street?

"Where are you going?"

He stopped and turned to face the voice from the shadows. "What's it to you?"

"You missed the meeting already, James." The shadows gave up the one hiding in them. A man dressed completely in black, tall and haughty. His dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail and despite that James could still see the grease in it. Greasy...that was the perfect description of Severus Snape.

"I was tied up," James snapped.

“How unfortunate. What possibly could have kept you from our meeting?”

“Things came up.”

“What things?”

“It’s none of your business. I’m here now.”

Snape gave him one of those annoyed looks but didn’t say anything else. “There have been rumors that you have a houseguest.”

He had been afraid of that. Stupid Meri taking Harry out of the house. “Well, we don’t. Same old ragged crew.”

“People are saying it’s a boy, looking to be around mid to late teens. They say he looks like you.”

“Really?” James flashed an ice cold smile. “Maybe I’m just looking younger.” Before he knew it, he had his back pinned up against the wall, Snape’s hook nose only inches away from his own.

“Do not play games with me. You’ve been playing with the big boys now for seventeen years. I would have thought you would know how to play the game by now but apparently you do not. Who is it that has been seen in Godric Hollow?”

“Some kid who ran away from home. Meri took pity on him, you know her, she’ll take in any stray.”

“That better be the case.”

Snape released him and James pushed off the other man’s hands with a snarl. “It is. Don’t touch me again.”

“Please, you honestly think I like being around you, Potter? That I meet with you just because I need the friends? I don’t normally associate with men who sell out their pregnant wives.”

Snape's throat was in his hands before he even registered how he got the other man on the ground. "You were supposed to protect her," he shrieked. "I gave her over to you to protect!"

A flash of light threw James back against the wall, the back of his head making a sickening thud from the impact. He slid down the rough brick to sit on the ground, too woozy to stand. Snape stood over him with a wand drawn.

"No James, you were supposed to protect her. Don't blame me for your ill decisions. And I'll be checking up on that 'houseguest' of yours."

James tried to come back with a retort, any kind of retort, but all he tasted was blood in his mouth. It would have to do, he thought as he spit it in the direction of Snape's high polished black shoes. It missed by a few inches but Snape got the idea.

"Pathetic," Snape sneered before melding back into the shadows. James rested his throbbing head on the brick wall behind him and let the darkness overtake him.

Chapter Seven: Have You Seen Me Lately?

Meri paced the small kitchen. She had made a pot of coffee but hadn't poured any of it yet. She couldn't sleep, not by a long shot, so she hadn't even tried tonight. This was going to be her second night with no sleep and the others were going to start to notice. Hence, the highly caffeinated coffee.

Harry had retired to bed after a rousing game of Rook with her and Sirius. Sirius had beat them both soundly but Meri had seen the hidden cards under his sleeve. Normally, she would have called him on it but her thoughts were elsewhere tonight. She had told Sirius that this was her home now and it was. But she couldn't help but fantasize about a possible reunion with the Remus from Harry's time. And she always felt guilty when she did.

She watched Sirius very closely that night while they laughed and played cards. He was easily her best friend here, pretty much as he had been in her time, but now there was almost a gentle adoration to the friendship. She loved him, she knew that much and was certain he loved her. But with Remus there had been a passion that lurked underneath the friendship. It was a passion that she found lacking with Sirius and it troubled her.

"What are you doing?"

Meri turned around to see a semi-coherent Remus Lupin staring at her. She could see the effects of alcohol in his eyes and stature but he had come home in worse condition. "Couldn't sleep. What are you doing?"

He motioned behind him and moved slightly as a very happy Peter stumbled through the doorway. "Io, Meri."

"Charming." Meri tried to suppress as smile as she pulled three mugs out of the cupboard. At least she wouldn't have to drink her coffee alone. Peter only drank every once in awhile and there had never seemed to be a rhyme or reason to his decision to indulge so Meri never scolded him for it. Besides, he was always really happy and equally entertaining. By the time she had set his coffee down in front of him, he was already laughing about something.

“See, this werewolf walks into a bar,” he started before laughing so hard tears were running down his cheeks.

“This is why we had to leave,” Remus said, grinning into his coffee cup. “He kept starting this joke and never finishing it.”

Remus was trying to make light of the matter but Meri could see how it pained him to have Peter repeating the same thing over and over again in front of a bar full of muggles. “Well, I think it’s time we finally heard the punch line. So, Pete, what happened after the werewolf walked into the bar?”

“He said ‘ouch.’”

Meri, Remus and Peter all turned to see a yawning Sirius standing in the doorway.

“You’ve heard it before.” Peter looked completely deflated.

“We all have, Pete,” Sirius said as he walked past the table and gave Peter’s shoulder a couple pats. “But it’s still a good joke.”

That seemed to buoy Peter’s spirits once again as he went back to giggling into the coffee mug. Meri hid her smile behind her hand as she caught clips of “werewolf,” “bar,” and “ouch” every couple of seconds. It was nice to see one of them happy even if it was chemically induced. Remus’ semi-good mood seemed to have dissipated at Sirius’ arrival and now he was frowning and staring at the table. She was still having a hard time wrapping her mind around him being so sober. She just hoped Sirius behaved himself.

“Wow, RJ,” Sirius said, sitting in the chair next to Meri. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this clear headed.”

So much for behaving himself. “Sirius, don’t.” As soon as the words left her lips she knew she had just lit a spark under a powder keg. She could feel Sirius bristle at her admonishment.

“It’s fine,” Remus said and the entire thing diffused.

Meri felt Sirius relax next to her but she knew it wouldn't last for long. When Peter and Remus left, he would immediately challenge her to give an explanation as to why she always defends Remus. Her answer is always the same but he never seems to believe her. Peter's sniggering filled the silence as the other three became lost in their own thoughts.

Sirius finally broke the semi-quiet. "Where's James?"

"He wasn't upstairs?" Meri asked.

Sirius shook his head and looked over at Remus.

"He wasn't at the bar."

"Ouch!" Peter turned to Remus and laughed so hard he nearly fell off his chair.

Meri tapped the tabletop with her fingertips. This was definitely not like James. He had a reputation for keeping to himself but never like this. If anything, he avoided the others but not her. There were many nights they spent sitting on the back porch talking about past times, jokes and lost loved ones. There were glimpses of the James she had grown up with in this James but even this was extreme.

"I think we should go look for him," she finally said.

"You think something's happened to him?" Sirius asked.

Something had happened to him since Harry arrived but she couldn't place her finger on it. There was more to it than just grieving over the loss of Lily and the baby but without knowing what exactly Meri kept quiet on the matter. "I'm afraid something has. We should check the accident departments first."

"Someone needs to stay with Harry," Sirius said. "As well as Mr. Giggles over there."

Remus drained his coffee mug and set it down with a loud bang. "I'll go with Meri."

Sirius stood up from the table. "Don't be daft. You're staying here."

Meri laid a hand on Sirius' arm. "No, it's alright." She tried to ignore the hurt and shock in Sirius' grey eyes. "It'll be fine."

"But will you?"

She didn't know if he said it on purpose to get her hackles up or if he was just concerned. "I can defend myself. I don't need you or Remus or," she pointed at Peter who was trying not to laugh unsuccessfully and thought better of including him, "or anyone else to protect me." The truth of the matter was she was just not up to a verbal spar over her unresolved feelings concerning a certain werewolf. She would go out to look for James, be reminded of how different this Remus was and come back to Sirius' more cheerful nature. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Everything will be fine."

He returned the embrace but not the sentiment. Meri pulled away and started down the hallway towards the front door. She could hear Remus' footfalls behind her and hoped this was not a faulty decision on her part. She stepped out into the cool night air and was thankful that it woke her up a bit. The city of London wasn't too far away, about a fifteen minute walk. They had chosen Godric's Hollow for the location. In case of an attack they could easily blend in with the crowds of the city.

"Do you want to catch a cab?"

Meri shook her head. "We may need to take one back to the house. It's best not to waste money."

Remus produced a wad of wrinkled up pounds. "I didn't spend all of it tonight."

Meri stopped and regarded him for a moment. The lamplight glinted off the grey hairs that had wound their way through his light brown hair and seemed to make the lines in his face deeper. He looked old, tired and more like the Remus from her time. After a moment of trying to place the change, she realized what it was: he was smiling slightly. "Why do you drink so much?"

“Why do you always defend me?”

Meri started walking down the street again. She could hear the business of London just a couple blocks away. “The answer is not the same.”

“Of course it is. You know that.”

“Remus-”

“I love you.”

She tried to counter the comment but her normal excuse of “you’re drunk” didn’t apply now. Besides, there was such a stark truth to how he said it. It was statement, not a plea or a question. He said it the way one would comment on the weather.

“And,” he continued, “I daresay you feel the same way.”

“No, I don’t. I loved the Remus from my time. You’re so different from him.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

He stopped and she turned to face him, already weary of the conversation. Her plan apparently worked. He had irritated her so much she was quick to find James and return home.

“Tell me something then,” he said, shoving his hands into his pockets, “if you loved the other Remus, the one from your time, and clearly are not smitten by me, then why haven’t you agreed to marrying Sirius yet?”

Her fingers itched to touch the ring that was hidden under her shirt. He had hit the proverbial nail on the head. Why had she been skittering around the marriage issue with Sirius? *Harry*, she thought. Harry could be a way back into her own time, to her original love. But Harry had only showed up a little over a day ago now so there had to be another reason for her hesitance.

“Meri?”

She squared her shoulders. “It’s none of your business.”

He smiled slightly. “That’s not what I meant.” He pointed to the right and Meri saw they were in front of the Accident Department.

She swallowed a nervous lump in her throat. “Oh, right.”

He thought he should have dreamed. Every time he closed his eyes he tried to hold on to that hope that this time he would dream. After Lily had been killed, he slept all the time, trying to dream about her, the life they had lived together and possible see what their life would have been had she lived. But he always woke up remembering nothing. It wasn’t until recently he would sleep and pray for a nightmare, anything that he could wake up and remember dreaming. But it never happened. He would close his eyes and wake up remembering nothing but darkness. Waking up the hospital was no different.

“James?”

He opened his eyes but all he saw was two blurry figures standing over him. He tried blinking a couple times but they remained unfocused.

“Here,” one of them said and he felt his glasses being slipped onto his face. As soon as they placed on his nose, he saw Meri and Remus staring down at him.

“Hey,” Meri smiled, but it was shaky. She was scared.

“Hey,” James tried to smile back but he could tell from their faces it fell flat.

“How did you end up here?” Remus asked.

James closed his eyes. “I, uh, got jumped in an alley.” It wasn’t the truth but it was not a total lie. But he was starting to get weary of the half-truths. But these were his only friends and to tell them the truth

meant the possibility of losing them. He had already lost his wife and child and the thought of losing his friends was just too much.

“James?”

He opened his eyes again. Meri was still leaning over him. “What?”

“Your doctor said you can come home if you want. Or they’ll keep you till later on this morning. Whatever you want to do will be fine.”

He felt the warm pressure of her hand on his arm. The heat had actually passed through the blanket and into his right side. He couldn’t tell if she was using a healing charm, warming charm or if it was just her natural warmth soaking through the fabric. She reminded him so much of his sister, this time’s Meriam Potter. She had told them all about their counterparts from her time but yet there was no different between the two women from separate times. She had lost her brother just as he had lost his sister but both of them had been handed a second chance.

He pushed himself up halfway in the bed. A second chance. That was what fate had given them. The Meri he had grown up with would understand where he was in his life. It never mattered what he did, Meri always accepted him. He would just trust that this Meri would be just as accepting.

“I’ll stay till later on this morning,” he said, turning his hand over and wrapping hold of Meri’s wrist. “But you need to stay with me.”

She nodded and turned to Remus who merely shrugged.

“I’ll let everyone know you’re fine.”

James watched Remus leave the small room and tried to stop his hands from shaking. Then he realized it wasn’t just his hands, but his entire body was quivering.

“James, are you alright? Are you cold?” Meri placed both hand around his.

"No, I'm fine." Even his glasses were bouncing on his nose. "I just, uh, I need to talk to you."

Meri quietly sat down on the bed, still holding his hand. He concentrated on the reassuring weight. "Sure, about what?"

The shaking had gotten so bad now that he could hear his teeth chattering. It was making speaking harder than it already was. He ground his molars together in an effort to spit the words out. "I, uh, I really have to tell...tell you something."

"Alright." Meri rubbed his arm encouragingly. "I'm sure whatever it is, we'll work it out."

He could feel that familiar pressure at the back of his eyes. The burning in his nose as the tears gathered and he just broke. He didn't even know how the words got out but he could tell from the way Meri's muscles tensed and relaxed where he was in the story of how things went so terribly wrong.

"I let Snape take Lily." He was gasping out the words. "I handed her over even though she had voiced her own doubts. When I told her it was alright, not to worry, she looked at me like I had betrayed her. And I did."

"We all thought Snape on was our side, James. That wasn't your fault."

James drew in a shuddering breath. "He's been holding it over my head for all these years."

"What?"

"Keeps saying I sold her out."

"Wait," Meri pulled back slightly and held him at arms length. "You're still in contact with Snape?"

James started to pull himself together. The worst was out on the table now and Meri hadn't left yet. "He keeps telling me he's going to tell you and the others what exactly I had done. How I had failed Lily."

Meri just stared at him with those hazel eyes. Her face was completely unreadable. "How could you think that we would blame you for what happened to Lily? We all loved her and believe me when I say this, but if we thought you were doing the wrong thing, we would have spoken up." A slow smile crept across Meri's face. "Sirius speaks up even when we don't want him to."

James laughed but cut it off, feeling that it was highly inappropriate at this time. But the grin on his younger sister's face showed him she felt otherwise. "There's more. He's used that guilt to have me do things...for *them*. Mostly just information gathering, and I've tried to give them all wrong information but there were times when I didn't have a choice."

"What kind of information?"

James shrugged and stared out the window. "Silly stuff really. They wanted me to locate magical artifacts mostly. At first they were really interested in the Founders of Hogwarts articles."

"Did you find any?"

"Some. I found a cup of Helga Hufflepuffs and a set of gold scales that were Rowena Ravenclaw's."

There was an eternity of silence before she pulled both of his hands into hers. "Snape has used guilt to convince you that you're less of a man than you really are. I've watched you change so much over these years into someone I hardly recognize. Snape is the one who betrayed Lily, he betrayed all of us but he has you carrying around his guilt."

"Meri, I don't know if I can get back to who I used to be."

"You can't."

James hung his head. She was right. He could never go back to who he was: strong, passionate and willing to die for the right cause. He felt his glasses slip on his tears down to the tip of his nose.

"You can be better than who you were. That's what becomes of us when we face obstacles and overcome them."

A second chance. That was what she meant by those words. If you fail at one test there is always another that comes along. A second chance to make things right when you fail the first time. He swiped at his eyes and pushed his glasses back up his nose. "You're right. I can be better than I was."

"Besides, you have someone who really needs you now. By coming here, he's been handed a second chance as well."

"Harry."

Meri nodded. "He never had a chance to sit down and talk to his father before."

"What do I tell him?"

"About what?"

"About what happened to his mother."

"You tell him the truth. That Snape was betrayer and you did what you thought was best at the time. He will not hold you accountable to that. If he does, he'll need to hold us all accountable."

"But what about the seventeen years of being Snape's lapdog?"

Meri paused to think about that. "Well, I daresay you've haven't been a very good one."

James frowned slightly. "Why would you say that?"

"The thing that Snape and Voldemort want the most is to see us wiped off the face of the Earth. In seventeen years you haven't sold us out and I might add, you're in the hospital right now so obviously you must have said something to get Snape mad."

"I try to do that every time I see him."

“See,” Meri playful punched his arm. “There’s the old you shining through.”

He had heard the saying “the truth will set you free” and never gave it much thought. He had always chalked it up to just a nice thing to say to make people want to be honest in difficult times. But now, having broken the spell of Snape’s long standing guilt, he saw the meaning behind those words so clearly. It was Harry’s first time to have a real father, but it was James’ second chance to make things right.

Have you seen me lately?

Can you tell me what you see in me

Have you seen me lately

All I see is what I used to be

It’s eleven-thirty I don’t have the time

To come before you now

Yeah-I know it’s been awhile

But I’m just to tired now

Please don’t be too angry didn’t you hear

Me mention you last week

I’m just worn out

Why can’t you let me sleep

(have you seen me lately?)

What has happened to my fire

The way you were my every desire

My God, I never meant to be this

Father hold me I can't see myself

Turn the phone off, throw the TV out

It's time to get it right and I will stare at myself

Even if it takes all night

How could I have thought I could keep you

In my grip you're a God of power

I take my eyes off you and I will surely slip

Have you seen me lately?

Can you tell me what you see in me

Have you seen me lately

All I see is what I used to be.

Have you seen me lately?

Chapter Eight: A Third Choice

Meri spent the night in the hospital by James' bedside. While he slept with the help of the muggle drugs, she stared out the window until the first pink, orange and red streaks announced the coming sun. The fact was she needed this time to think without the fear of being interrupted. She knew she couldn't keep going on being divided the way she was with Sirius and Remus. She had to come to a conclusion and soon. This kind of distraction will do nothing except get her killed during a Death Eater attack.

"There's always a third choice, you know."

Meri looked over in mild surprise to see James sitting up in bed. His hair was mussed up and she had a brief flashback of him getting off his broom after playing Quidditch. What she wouldn't give to play Quidditch again. "What do you mean?"

He yawned immensely and clumsily grabbed his glasses only to shove them haphazardly on his face. "You always look that way when you're trying to make a decision. I can only guess what this one is."

Meri crossed her arms and smirked. "Give it a go then."

"From the way you've been behaving lately, I'd say you're stuck in the middle of the great Sirius/Remus debate."

She tried to hide her shock but could tell from her brother's smug look she was failing miserably. "Is it that obvious?"

"You may be one of the best Occlumens around but there's just some things you can't hide from a brother."

Meri took a steadying breath and swallowed the tears that rose up in her throat. "Thanks, James. So what is the third choice?"

"You wait."

She waited for him to expound but nothing came. "Wait for what?"

"The one you're suppose to be with. It could be you haven't even met him yet. Or you have and just don't realize it yet."

She smirked. "What it be Snape." It made sense to her, though. When neither one of them felt right then the only option was to walk away. "What about Sirius?"

"What about him?"

"He's been very dogmatic, no pun intended, about a relationship."

James rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, I don't want this to come out mean but Sirius has ADD when it comes to relationships with women. Give him a few weeks and I'll take him down to the pub and set his sights on someone else. How's that?"

Meri felt laughter bubble up from inside of her and was surprised at the unfamiliarity of it. How long had it been since she had just laughed? "Come on," she picked up James' clothes and tossed them to him. "Let's get you home. You have a son to spend time with today."

Harry was used to the many, many arguments that broke out between Ron and Hermione, but nothing prepared him for the breakfast table at Godric's Hollow. Even though neither one of them were eating anything, Sirius and Remus were having a stare down contest while Peter and he were trying to eat in comfortable quiet. But seeing the hard lines on Sirius' face and the almost feral look that adorned Remus', food was the last thing on Harry's mind. He felt more like finding safety than the next spoonful of cereal.

"Don't worry," Peter said quietly, "James and Meri will be back soon."

But it was if the mere mention of his Aunt's name set the other two men off. Harry couldn't even keep up with the insults being thrown across the table. Then the most surprising thing happened: Peter Pettigrew stood up and let out an ear deafening roar which silenced the men.

“Would you two kindly take your pissing contest outside? Harry and I are trying to enjoy our breakfast like civilized men.”

It took a few seconds for everything to register but eventually Sirius and Remus excused themselves from the table and left Harry and Peter by themselves. Peter nodded in satisfaction and returned to his chair.

“Now, then, Harry, what would you like to do today?”

Harry went to say something only to find his mouth was still hanging open in shock. He snapped it shut, cracking his molars together. He took a few moments to study the man seated before him and could hardly believe that this was *the* Peter Pettigrew. Well groomed, well dressed, a slight roundness to him without being overweight and definitely more confident. It was almost easy to believe that the other three had come to flock around him instead of him begging and groveling his way into their group.

“What kind of animagus are you?”

Peter looked up from his bowl with a curious look on his face. “I beg your pardon?”

Even Harry to had jar his memory to remember what question had just flown his mouth. Swallowing a lump of nervousness, he asked the question again. “What kind of animagus do you turn into?”

“How did you...ah, yes, the Peter from your time is an animagus as well?”

Harry nodded.

“I turn into a mouse. Your garden variety field mouse.”

“A mouse?” Harry repeated. “Not a...a rat?”

Peter laughed. “A rat? Heavens no. I would serious worry about one of my friends if they turned into a rat as their animagus form.”

“My parents didn’t.”

All laughter and teasing fell from Peter's face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I'm sure rats serve their purpose as well."

"It's alright," Harry tried to brush off the conversation and go back to eating but his appetite seemed to have left him. "Um, what are everyone else's forms?"

"Well, obviously, Remus is a werewolf so he doesn't have one. James is a stag, Sirius is a black dog and Meri is an owl. Is that the same from your time?"

Harry nodded. "Except for Meri, I never even knew she existed."

Peter dropped his spoon into his empty bowl. "Really? No one told you had a aunt?"

"No. I figure they didn't want to tell me of one more family member that was dead...or missing as it is."

"Is it terribly different here from where you come from?"

The question left Harry speechless, not because he didn't have an answer but because there were so many things that were different. "It's definitely different. Things were just starting to get bad when I came here. You know, the being unsafe outdoors, constantly looking over your shoulder. But our numbers were greater, the witches and wizards that were against Voldemort."

Peter remained thoughtful for a moment before answering. "I think our numbers are greater than we know. There is just so much fear in the wizarding community that I think is keeping people from helping us." A great sadness seemed to fall across his features as he stared at Harry, more importantly, the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. "We have nothing to rally around, no leader, no sign of hope."

"What do you mean?"

"We don't have the Boy Who Lived. Meri told us the story of how you survived. How Voldemort's killing curse rebounded on to himself. That something held him to the living world but he was less than living. She also said that because of your mother's willing sacrifice,

you were protected away from Hogwarts as long as you resided in your Aunt Petunia's home. At least that was her theory."

Harry nodded his head. "She was right."

Peter shook his head. "She was inconsolable when she got here. She screamed your name till she lost her voice. She even went into a muggle community and pounded on doors seeing if you had been brought there. We all thought she had lost her mind till she calmed down enough to tell us what happened on her part. That was when we realized she was from another time."

"Did you ever find out why Voldemort wasn't killed by his own killing curse?"

Peter shook his head. "No, we couldn't find anything in books that could explain that. We found lots of things to stave off death but never stop it."

"They're called Horcruxes."

Peter sat up in his chair, interest replacing the sadness. "Horcruxes?"

"They're objects that he was able to store a shard of his soul. If you find the Horcruxes and destroy them, he'll no longer have that hold to living world."

Peter sat up with a mix of shock and awe. He opened his mouth to say something when a silvery material entered the kitchen and solidified into a giant panda patronus. Harry was about to ask who's this was when the mouth opened and Meri's voice answered his question.

"Death Eaters were waiting for us outside the hospital. We need help."

Peter stood up with such force the chair toppled backwards. "SIRIUS! REMUS!"

All signs of their previous argument were gone as both men returned to the kitchen, wide-eyed and serious.

“Death Eaters at the hospital. Meri just sent a patronus.”

Harry stood up and started to follow the three men out the front door when Sirius turned around and held him back. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m going to help.” He even pulled out his wand to show them.

“If they see you-” Peter started, but Harry cut him off.

“They won’t know who I am. Look, I’ve faced off with Death Eaters before, I even had to face Voldemort himself. I can hold my own.”

Sirius looked pleadingly back to the other two. Remus shrugged his thin shoulders and Peter looked terribly uncomfortable. Sirius let out an exasperated sigh. “Fine. Stay close to us. Do not do anything to be a hero. You are no good to us dead.”

Harry nodded in agreement but couldn’t quite shrug off the memory of the last time he fought side by side with Sirius. Even as they set off down the sidewalk towards the hospital, Harry could hear those whispered voices behind the veil as if he were back in the Department of Mysteries.

Author’s Notes: Hi all! I’m sorry for the long hiatus. I was making story notes when book 7 came out so I took time out to read the final book. Obviously, this story is set shortly after the sixth book so I just wanted to let everyone know there are some parts from book 7 that I will be keeping and others that I will rewrite (no offense to JK - I loved the 7th book!). But that is the joy of fan fiction!

And as for my reviewer, Raymond, I just wanted to make sure that you had read the complete chapter because Meri herself explains why Harry was not allowed to stay with her or Sirius:

“It all depends on how,” she swallowed convulsively, “how they died. If James was surprised and just killed, then he wouldn’t have had a chance to cast a protection charm. I’m thinking that Dumbledore knows something we don’t. If Lily willingly died for Harry then yes, he

would be safest at his muggle's Aunt's home." Reluctantly, she slowly handed the bundle over to Hagrid. "Make sure he gets there safely."

Also, please keep in the mind the spirit of fan fiction, that it is a creative playground for writers.

Chapter Nine: So Long, So Long

*How the girls could turn to ghosts before your eyes
And the very dreams that led to them are keeping them from dying
And how the grace with which she walked into your life
And stay with you in your steps , pace with you a while
For so long, so long
so long so long*

*But just as summer's hold is fleeting
I was here but now I'm gone*

- So Long, So Long by Dashboard Confessional

The dumpster rattled under the onslaught of hexes and curses. Meri and James had taken refuge behind the large metal trash bin not really knowing where to go. They were on the outskirts of London itself so their choices were extremely limited: go further into the city where there was an abundance of muggles or retreat away from the city and lead them all to Godric's Hollow.

"Any other ideas, Prongs?"

"Well, I actually think we're in a great position."

"Trapped in an alley?"

James nodded and flashed her a wide grin. "The cavalry is here."

Meri heard the scuffle and shouts increase so she peeked over the twisted metal to see that James was right. Peter, Sirius and Lupin were flinging counter curses left and right. Then she saw the fourth man. "Oh Merlin!"

"What?"

"They brought Harry!"

"They can't be that daft!"

"Apparently they are."

James launched himself from behind the dumpster with Meri right at his heels. From a quick head count the numbers were no longer in the Death Eaters favor. Meri grabbed the wrist of the closest Death Eater and shoved his arm towards one of his own allies. The curse that was intended for her knocked another Death Eater back against the brick wall. If the curse didn't knock him out, striking the wall certainly did the trick. Meri looked back to the Death Eater she had grabbed and the recognition shocked her. Without a second thought, she slammed her mental shields up and forced the anger she felt out of her mind.

"Snape," she spat.

"Meri," he replied with his usual draw.

She twisted his wrist and easily spun him around, aiming his body towards the wall. However, she failed to think of the small fact that he was stronger than her and at the last minute used the momentum to send her into the wall. She felt the wet ground connect with her knees and she desperately tried to blink back the stars that had popped out in front of her eyes. By the time she pointed her wand back to Snape, he was knocked back and skidded down the alley. Meri looked up to see Harry standing over her, wand outstretched. He looked down at her with an uneasy look.

"Tell me he's not our side."

"Definitely not on our side," she confirmed. He helped her to her feet and they saw two Death Eaters remained. Meri grabbed her nephew and shoved him behind her. She lifted her free hand, palm outward and Harry watched with fascination as her patronus erupted forth from her hand and charged the two remaining Death Eaters. It was just enough a distraction for the other three to drive off the Death Eaters.

"Thanks guys," Meri said with a nod, before holding a hand to her head.

"You alright?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, just fine. I'm using a healing charm."

“What do we do with Snape down there?” Sirius asked.

James stared at the limp body for a long time and Harry was afraid he was about to see them all drop down to the level of the Death Eaters. But after a few moments, James stowed his wand. “Leave him there. Let him wake up in an alley for once.”

Harry followed suite and stowed his wand as well and gathered around with the others. Peter acted as a look out to make sure no muggles stumbled upon the curse ridden alleyway. Sirius and Remus seemed to have completely forgotten their previous argument as they stood on either side of Meri. A hand landed on Harry’s shoulder and he looked up to see his father staring down at him.

“You did very well,” he seemed to swallow convulsively before finishing, “son.”

Harry felt a swell of pride in his chest and tried, to no avail, to hide his pleased smile. “Thanks...Dad.”

Meri laughed. “Thank goodness that worked,” she pulled out a chain with a time turner attached to it. “I really didn’t want to try this thing out yet. I’m not sure I even fixed it correctly.”

“Is that mine or yours?” Harry asked.

“It’s mine.”

Harry saw a brief movement out of the corner of his eye and turned around to see what it was. Snape had awakened and was standing, wand aimed directly at Meri. There was no warning, no incantation that he could hear but he recognized the green light that issued forth from the wand. He didn’t have time to think, just react. He leaned with all of his weight against his Aunt’s slight frame in an effort to push them both out of the way but she resisted as best she could. Harry chanced a look at the spell and all he saw was green.

Meri felt like she had been run over by a hippogriff. Groaning, she pushed herself off the ground and tried to figure out what happened. She was no longer in the alleyway with James and the others.

Instead, she was out in the open on a bright and sunny day with grass underneath her. She looked around and found Harry laying unmoving on the ground next to her.

“Harry!” She leaned over him and placed her fingers on his neck. His pulse pushed against her fingertips with a great amount of strength. Breathing a sigh of relief, she pulled her wand and slowly stood up from a row of bushes they had landed behind. The sight that met her eyes was so shocking it took her breath away. She was staring at the rubble of James and Lily’s home in Godric’s Hollow. Death Eaters, from the looks of them were climbing across the stone and mortar, searching for someone or something.

“Come out, come out, Potter!” a shrill voice echoed across the street to Meri’s ears. Judging from the chills that ran down her back, it was most likely Bellatrix Lestrange’s voice. She glanced down at Harry by her side, who was still unconscious. This must have been when he was sent into the other time. Armed with that knowledge, she watched the event play out before her eyes. If she stopped them before Harry disappeared...well, that would just complicate things immensely.

When Bellatrix sent out the killing curse, she watched as it hit Harry and he just disappeared. Meri took advantage of the momentary shock of the Death Eaters and Harry’s friends and jumped from the bushes. Sprinting across the small yard, she aimed her wand at the two teenagers who remained and shouted “Protego!” A silvery shield shot out in front of them and the Death Eaters took a few seconds to register her presence. Bellatrix was the first to recover her ability of speech.

“Meriam Potter!” She let out a cackle. “Where have you been hiding?”

Meri knew she shouldn’t use this spell but the anger for the woman standing in front of her was overwhelming. “Sectumsempra!”

A large gash appeared across Bellatrix’s chest and she fell back in a scream of pain. The other two Death Eaters seemed to stop any assault they were going to try. Meri held her wand steady though she was shaking inside. She hated using dark magic even if the victim deserved it.

“Go back to you Master. Take her with you,” Meri flicked her wand over to the writhing Bellatrix. “Tell him what happened. I’m sure he’ll be very interested in knowing I’ve returned.”

They looked at each other and then quickly did as she said, much to Meri’s relief. When they left, the shield she had conjured dropped from the two teenagers. Meri approached them cautiously as the girl held out her wand in case she ended up being an enemy. Meri slipped her wand in her back pocket and held up her hands in a “surrender” sign.

“You must be Harry’s friends.”

“Who are you?” the girl asked.

“Wait! Don’t!” a shout came from behind Meri and before she had time to turn around, Harry had flung himself between her and the wand. “She’s a friend! Trust me!”

The girl’s wand slowly lowered. “Are you alright, Harry?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Who’s that then, mate?” the red-headed boy asked.

Harry looked back at Meri and gave her a shaky grin. “She’s my aunt. My father’s sister, Meri. These are my friends, Ron and Hermione.”

“I didn’t know your father had a sister,” Hermione said.

“I didn’t either,” Harry exclaimed.

“It’s a very interesting story,” Meri broke in, “one that should most likely should be told somewhere other than here.”

“She’s right.” Harry agreed and looked over at Ron. “The Burrow?”

Ron nodded. “That would be the best place I think.”

“Do you know-”

“Yes,” Meri answered. “I’m very familiar with the Weasley homestead.”

“Right then,” Harry nodded and closed his eyes, picturing the cozy house in his mind before apparating.

Snape was sitting in the threadbare arm chair in his childhood home at Spinner’s End. He was trying to read but he hadn’t turned a page in over an hour. Having Wormtail as a houseguest was less than relaxing, especially when he had so much on his mind that needed to be processed.

Dumbledore, his greatest ally and possibly the only person who saw potential in a man like Snape, was dead. Not just dead, though, but by Snape’s own hand. He knew he had an unbreakable vow with Narcissa to ensure Draco’s safety from the hands of Voldemort as well as giving his word to Dumbledore to commit the act itself. He tried telling himself that he did what he was told. He followed orders and succeeded. But it left him shaken and even more despondent.

True, Voldemort had praised Snape immensely but that wasn’t the praise he wanted or craved. No, he longed to go back to Hogwarts, back to the only home he ever knew. At least the other teachers treated him as an equal and he had a routine. Here, all he did was wait for the next order from the Dark Lord himself and babysit Pettigrew. Even in broad daylight in this house, when Pettigrew was not moving around and the house silent, he could still hear his father’s voice bounce off the walls, nothing more than a series of curse words and abusive speech.

He often wondered if he should have struck a deal himself with Dumbledore-I’ll kill you if you’ll kill me. But no, Dumbledore, always looking to the future wanted Snape to live. The late Headmaster was not a cruel man and surely he did not want to condemn Snape to a life filled with guilt and deception? Surely it couldn’t just be to continue as a double agent? No one from the Order is going to listen him now. No, death seemed very inviting right now.

And in that split second, Snape thought his wish had been granted. A searing pain ripped through his skull and he found himself gasping on

the floor. He was dimly aware of Pettigrew picking him up and putting him back in the arm chair, whimpering and simpering the entire time. Snape ground his teeth together.

“Go away.”

Pettigrew retreated hesitantly, but at last left the room. Snape dropped his head into his hands and squeezed as hard as he could to keep it from flying apart. The pain was lessening but the a steady throbbing was still remaining. He wasn't sure what exactly had brought this on but he needed the quiet to concentrate. Steadying his breathing, he dropped some of his mental shields and skimmed the surface of the minds he could reach.

Pettigrew was more startled then concerned at the scream Snape supposedly had emitted. Voldemort was content at the moment. Bellatrix was in a severe amount of pain and being carried back to the Dark Lord and Snape thought he had found the source of the headache but a second check proved he was wrong. He tried to reach out further and finally his mind brushed someone else's whose was strangely familiar.

“Sev? *Is that you?*” she immediately whispered in his mind.

He tried to silence the gasp before it was released but had a sinking feeling he failed. It couldn't be. She had been gone for almost sixteen years now. He had given her up as dead since he could no longer find her mind in the midst of so many others. Unnerved and frightened by the familiar voice in his head, Severus closed his mind up tightly, allowing no access whatsoever. He would keep it that way till the day he died now. She was just one more reminder of the many he had failed. He tried to pick up the book and read again but all he could focus on was the name of the person who had reached him just moments before.

Meri Potter was back from wherever she had disappeared to and he hated the way it shook him to the core.

Chapter Ten: Reunion

Meri had escaped from the house and settled herself in the Burrow's garden. Her welcome at the Weasley home had been one of extreme glee and astonishment. But there was only so much happiness she could take at the moment. She had returned to her own time but she had lost her brother all over again. Not to mention Sirius and Peter was back to being a traitor once more. It was a true shame now she had seen what he could have become had he stood up to Voldemort.

The other thing that bothered her was the fact Snape hadn't contacted her yet. She thought she had found him but the mental shields went up so fast she still had a headache from it. She had been informed that Snape was responsible for Dumbledore's death, but she found that extremely hard to believe. Dumbledore had called for a meeting shortly after Snape defected from the Death Eaters and what she found in his mind was fear but resolution. She had assured Dumbledore of his sincerity. Perhaps she had been wrong all along.

"Hey."

Meri turned to see Harry standing next to her. "Hey."

"Is it alright that I'm out here with you? I mean, you didn't want to be alone, did you?"

Meri patted the stone wall beside her. "I don't mind having you out here with me. I did need a break though."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Half of the Order isn't even here yet."

"You're kidding." Meri turned back to look at the already full house wondering how in the world they would fit more people in there. But the large amount of numbers did her confidence good. They at least had a fighting chance this time around.

"Look, uh," Harry kicked at the stone wall nervously. "I uh, I don't know how to tell you this, or if it's any of my business really..."

"I'm a big girl, Harry. I think I can take it."

“Remus is married. In fact, they just announced not too long ago that they’re expecting a baby.”

Meri was so thankful she was already sitting down on the wall. She swallowed the burst of air that was knocked out of her lungs at the announcement. But why shouldn’t she have expected that? She bit back her bitter disappointment and summoned up a sense of gratefulness. “That’s good. That’s really good news.”

“But I thought that-“

“That was sixteen years ago, Harry. I know Remus wanted a family of his own but he was so terribly nervous about his condition and passing it along.” It was getting easier to be happy for her old friend as she spoke so she kept it up. “I can’t wait to meet his wife. She must be a force to be reckoned with if she got him to marry her and have a kid.”

Harry laughed, relief obvious in his face. “She is. Her name is Nymphadora Tonks, but don’t call her by her first name. Most of us call her Tonks.”

Meri turned to Harry and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you, Harry, for telling me that. And don’t ever worry about telling me anything. Chances are, I’ve handled a lot worse.”

He nodded. “Alright then.”

Meri turned back to the house and saw a red-headed girl staring out of the window at them. Ginny, Meri remembered from the introduction. “She really likes you know.” Meri turned back to Harry. “Ginny, I mean. I may go so far as to say love judging from how she looks at you.”

“Yeah, sure. I guess.”

“What are your feelings for her?”

“It’s...complicated.”

Meri grinned. She knew all about complications. “Is this too deep a subject to talk about with your newfound aunt?”

Harry grinned slightly. "No, not really. It just comes down to fact that Dumbledore left me with a mission that I need to complete and I don't want to put her in danger. And," he paused, "I'm not sure if I'm going to survive this."

"I don't think any of us are certain that we're going to survive, Harry. As for not wanting to put her in danger, that's very noble but not practical. If James and Lily took to that line of thinking, you wouldn't exist right now."

Harry shook his head. "I just want to do what's right."

"And that's why you'll end up doing the right thing." Meri fingered the chain that was around her neck and finally pulled out the diamond ring from under her shirt. She unclasped the necklace and slid the ring into the palm of her hand. She gave it one last look before holding it out to Harry. "Here, I want you to take this."

He looked down at the ring in confusion. "Where did you get that?"

"It doesn't matter. I want you to have it and give it to Ginny whenever you feel it's right."

"Did Remus give-

She sighed briefly. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind that I gave it to you."

Harry took the ring from her almost reverently and stared at it. "Thank you."

Meri patted his shoulder and finally pulled him into a hug, which he didn't fight at all. "I love you, kid. I told you that half a dozen times when you were little but I'm sure you don't remember that."

She felt Harry start to say something when a voice cut through the night air with a ring of such familiarity to it, Meri couldn't hide her smile.

"So where is she?"

The recognizable thumping of his wooden leg announced Mad-Eye Moody's presence before Meri could even release Harry and turn around. She gave him one last squeeze before jumping off the wall and walking over to Moody. She was surprised he was the one that initiated the hug but she welcomed it all the same. It only lasted a few seconds before he pushed her away and cleared his throat.

"That's enough of that then," he grumbled. "Let's look at you, now. You've been keeping up with your training."

Meri bit the inside of her cheek. "I'm thirty-six, Alastair. I've been living in a world that is run by Voldermort. What do you think?"

"Good, good. You can never slack off with your training."

"No sir." Meri motioned for Harry to join them. "Harry, here's something you probably don't know about me. I was an Auror at the ministry. I was taught by the best." She punched Moody in the arm playfully. "Alastair was my mentor when I went through my training."

"She was one of the finest Aurors we ever had. Interrogation skills like no other. If you still want to be a Auror, Harry, listen to your Aunt here. She won't lead you wrong."

"Thanks, I'll keep that mind," Harry responded.

Another voice echoed through the night that gave Meri another jolt of excitement. She didn't even have time to respond before the ground shook under her feet and Hagrid's enormous shape squeezed through the door of the Burrow and out in the backyard. Realizing the odd rendition of the "welcome home" party was now being moved outside as well, Meri steeled herself for the trickling in Order members.

"Hey, Hagrid!" Meri called. By the time she reached the half-giant, he had tears, actual tears running down into his beard. It touched her to no end to see the out pouring of emotion from an old friend. She allowed a few tears for herself and hid them from everyone when Hagrid pulled her into a giant sized hug.

He waited for her long into the night, constantly checking his arm in case he would be summoned. He thought he had a chance when she first came out into the backyard but then Potter followed her out. Shortly after that, pretty much everyone came outside. The Weasley twins had even set up enchanted lanterns along the perimeter of the yard which drove him further into the shadows.

He should have been thankful just to see her with his own eyes. She had definitely aged over the last sixteen years but not by any drastic means. She was still tall and thin, shaggy black hair that had the usual messed up look of the Potter family. He knew he should have felt some annoyance at the strong resemblance of James, but he couldn't. She was quite possibly the only ally he had left.

It wasn't until the early hours of the morning that Meri was left alone in the backyard. He wasn't sure how shielded her mind was at the moment. When he flitted across her conscious he found her very sleepy but troubled. Well, it was now or never. He gave her a hard stare and concentrated. He was very much out of practice when it came to communicating this way.

Meri...

She jumped about two feet. Apparently her shields were farther down than he expected.

Severus? Where are you?

Out in the meadow.

He barely had time to step from the shadows before she was on him, with sixteen years of fury behind her. She flung out her hand and before he could even raise his wand, Snape found himself thrown to the ground and held there. Meri's face was white in the semi-moonlight and pinched.

"You have a lot of explaining to do," she snarled.

Annoyance and anger fused together and it was as if they were back at Hogwarts. "You think so? What about you?"

"I'm not the one that killed Dumbledore. At least, that's what everyone is telling me."

"You don't understand."

"Then explain it to me!"

He had seen her angry before but this was a completely different Meri. There was true rage behind her blue eyes which were burning with more aggression than he had ever seen. He took the time to study her now that she was close up. His first assumption of her being thin was true but it was more than that. She had the appearance of someone who hasn't eaten in over week yet with the emotions driving her, she looked like she was about to tear him apart at any given moment. "What happened to you?"

"What happened? I've been living in a nightmare that was run by your master. What's happened to you? Just dreaming up that world these last few years? Waiting to make to your move?"

He never thought it was possible but she had rendered him speechless. He was still searching for what he wanted to say but couldn't decide how he could put without betraying Dumbledore. Apparently, he took too long and Meri's lip curled.

"Glad to see some things didn't change while I've been gone. You're still an insufferable, arrogant little berk."

Snape shoved himself back up onto his feet and brushed off his robes. "If you would give me a moment-

"How about a look into that brain of yours? Why are you so guarded around me?"

"I'm allowed my secrets."

"Not now, not with me. Dumbledore trained us, together, if you'll remember for the sole purpose of bringing down the Dark Lord."

"How could I forget those...engaging lessons."

“What happened to Dumbeldore? And I deserve a truthful answer.”

“Do you now?”

Meri stepped right up into his face. “I was the one that vouched for you. I used legilimencey and told Dumbledore what I saw in your mind was true repentance. He trusted you on my word. I find out now, sixteen years later that I was wrong?!”

“No,” the word slipped out before he even had a chance to stop it. But it stopped her from talking and caught her interest. “You were not mistaken.”

“How did he die, Severus?”

He could keep up his mental shields at all times but Meri was relentless. She would wait for a moment's slip and barrel her way through to find the truth. He sometimes wondered why Voldermort didn't do the same to him. Surely it wasn't because Meri was a stronger legilimens then the Dark Lord himself?

“Sev?”

Deception never worked with her. Besides, he was getting weary of it anyway. If anyone could understand the situation, could help in the situation, it was her. Perhaps that was why she was brought back to this time. But fate never worked that way for him in the past, why should it start now? He would have to take his chances with the truth. “I killed him.”

Confusion and disgust spread across her face quickly. “What?”

“I killed him by his own request. He was dying from a curse already. The Dark Lord had set Draco Malfoy up to fail in an assassination attempt on Dumbledore just to punish Lucius. He didn't want to die from the curse and he didn't want Draco to be responsible for murder.”

“So he asked you to do it?”

“Yes.”

“Why you?”

“I assume it was to stay in the Dark Lord’s good graces, as well as relieving Draco of his nasty task.”

Meri seemed to process the facts for a while. Finally, she crossed her arms across her chest and stared up at the stars. “Dumbledore’s gone then.”

Snape remained silent.

“Are you really on our side?”

“You’re the one who saw into my mind.”

The anger flashed across her face again. “You were worried over Lily. I think you would have been willing to sell your own soul if it meant keeping her alive.”

“And you wouldn’t have?” he countered. “For your brother? For your nephew?”

She sighed heavily. “You’re right, Severus. I did see into your mind back then. But I can’t right now. You’ve shut me out completely. I don’t know for sure who’s side your on.”

“I suppose you’ll just have to trust me then.”

Meri stepped up to him and stared him right in the eyes. He knew she was trying to see in but frustration was written all over her face. “We’ll just have to see about that.”

Chapter Eleven: Sushi with a Werewolf

"But," said Harry, "just say - just say Dumbledore's wrong about Snape-"

(Lupin speaking) "People have said it, many times. It comes down to whether or not you trust Dumbledore's judgment. I do; therefore, I trust Severus."

-Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince, Chapter 16

Molly Weasley had been kind enough to provide some clothes for Meri the morning following the reunion bash. Meri hadn't even put any thought to where she would live now or the basic fact she was starting from scratch. The only difference this time was she had no one to help her. True, Arthur and Molly had opened their home till she organized things but when she had found herself in the other dimension, there was James, Remus, Sirius and Peter to take her in. James and Sirius were dead here, Peter was a traitor and Remus had his own family to look after now.

She had spent the morning verifying her existence with the Ministry of Magic (and stopped off for a quick check in at the Auror floor) as well as Gringotts Bank. Goblins were nasty little creatures. It took her over three hours to verify her identity before they unlocked her vault. When her parents died, they split the estate between her and James. She didn't have to work another day in her life but it just didn't feel right to not work. Now, she was thankful she had hoarded that gold and took out enough for a house in Godric's Hollow, some furniture, clothes and of course, lunch with her, Harry and Remus since last night had been a full moon.

Tonks was suppose to come with them but she met the pink haired Auror on her trip to the Ministry and found lively witch was bogged down with cases and couldn't get away. Meri told her she understood and asked if she wanted to reschedule. Tonks waved her off and told her to go enjoy herself and catch up with Remus. Meri left having a sneaking suspicion she was being set up for something. No sooner had she reached the Japanese restaurant in downtown London when her cell phone rang.

Still under the influence of learning to make do without magic, she had insisted she and Harry have cell phones to keep in contact. She highly doubted Voldemort and the Death Eaters were tracing cellular calls at the moment. Sure enough, when she answered it was her nephew, backing out of lunch because of something he, Ron and Hermione had to do. When she asked him if he had spoken to Tonks there just too long of a pause before he denied it. She had just warned him that she could read minds and to watch himself before she hung up and there was Remus standing in front of her.

He had aged more gracefully than his counterpart and it brought tears to her eyes to see the warmth in his blue eyes again. He was much grayer than she expected and he had that pale pallor that always came after a full moon but even that couldn't hide his happiness and excitement over the meeting. He didn't say anything, no greeting whatsoever, he just opened his arms and she fell into a familiar place after so many years of not having one.

It was overwhelming, more so than she expected. Everything was painfully well-known: the feel of his arms around her, his scent, even his frame hadn't changed at all. Just as she was beginning to relish the feeling of coming home, truly coming home this time, the voice in the back of her head kept whispering, *he's no longer yours*. But she refused to let tears of disappointment replace her ones of happiness. She pulled out of the hug reluctantly and wiped her eyes.

"I feel like I've done nothing but cry since I got here," she laughed.

"Well, sixteen years is a very long time to be away from friends. You're not the only one crying."

And it was true. Even though he wasn't technically crying, Meri could see his eyes were welled up with tears that hadn't yet fallen. It made her feel better about the emotions she was releasing. She had tried to hide her feelings once and the memory of the outcome of that time was still painful to remember. So she shoved it out of her mind and smiled. "I bet you're really hungry after last night."

They entered the restaurant and she found it to not have changed since the last time she had eaten here with Remus. For some reason, after a transformation there were times when Remus would want raw

meat. James had stated it was just downright disturbing watching their friend tear into a raw steak so they opted for raw fish instead. It seemed to satisfy the wolf for the time being so the day after a full moon always because “sushi day” for the whole group.

“I’m surprised you even remember this place,” he said as they were seated in a booth towards the back of the restaurant.

“This used to be a our local hang out...how could I forget.”

“Where’s Harry?”

“About that,” Meri opened her menu with a forced angry snap, “I believe we’ve been had.”

“What do you mean?”

“I saw Tonks this morning over at the Ministry and she told me she was too bogged down to come.”

He nodded. “She told me this morning that might be a possibility.”

“Then my dear nephew calls me right as I got here backing out as well.”

“Coincidence?”

“I think not,” Meri said seriously before they both starting laughing. It was an old joke that whenever a prank was pulled for whatever reason one of them, James usually would start with the “Coincidence?” and Sirius would finish it with “I think not.” As quickly as the laughter came, it dissipated as the words hung between them representing all that had been lost. But it only last for the moment before Meri started asking questions about what she had missed.

He knew her well enough to know what details would be important to her: what happened to Peter and Sirius, where were the Chudley Cannons in the Quidditch standings, how was the Ministry handling the renewed threat of Voldemort and how was Hogwarts holding up. Those conversations took up most of the time of the meal. It wasn’t until they were finishing off the tea that Meri brought up something

that had been on her mind. She wasn't sure who else to talk to about her surprise visit from Snape last night and not be quick to judge the event.

"Moony, I have a question for you."

He took a sip of his tea and raised his eyebrows. "Shoot."

"Everyone that I've spoken to has told me that Severus is the one who killed Dumbledore. Is it true?"

He sat back in the booth and stayed quiet for a long time before responding. "It is."

"He stopped by the Burrow last night and spoke with me."

"Dumbledore?"

"No, Severus."

Shock spread across Remus face. "Really? What did he say?"

"Well, after being his typically charming self, he told me some interesting things. But before I reveal any of them, I want your honest opinion of him. Who's side do you think he's on?"

Remus scratched the back of his neck. "I used to trust Dumbledore whole heartedly when he claimed Severus was on our side, that he had truly repented. But now, after he was the one that killed Dumbledore, I don't really know what to think."

"Do you think there could be a believable reason for his actions?"

"For killing Dumbledore?" Remus let out a humorless laugh. "Not unless Dumbledore himself told Severus to do it, I don't see..." And realization dawned on Remus' face. "That's why he told you he did it? Because Dumbledore asked him to kill him?"

Meri shrugged. "That was his main explanation. That Dumbledore was dying of a curse and Voldemort had set Draco up to fail in an

assassination attempt to punish Lucius and Dumbledore didn't want blood on the boy's hands."

Remus stared ahead with a thoughtful look on his face and Meri took that time process everything all over again. When Remus spoke, it wasn't what she expected to hear.

"Why are you asking me my opinion of Severus?"

"Because you always gave him the benefit of the doubt. You picked out the good you saw in him, no matter how little it was."

"And you didn't? I remember many arguments you had with Sirius over Severus and the time you spent him."

Meri fiddled with the sugar packets in front of her. "I'm coming from a time where Severus Snape killed, maimed and poisoned anyone that got between him and Voldemort's side. You think this time's Severus is a nasty piece of work, let me tell you, the one I've been dealing with for these last sixteen years makes this one look like the Easter Bunny."

Remus smiled slightly. "So, why does my opinion count so much? You're the legilimens."

Meri rubbed her forehead. "He wouldn't let me in his mind. He had me completely blocked out and I don't know why."

"I have a question for you."

Meri nodded.

"Rumor was that Dumbledore had you look into his mind when he made his remorseful recant from the Death Eaters. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Was it genuine?"

"At the time, I believed it to be."

“And the only thing that you has doubted what you saw is the fact that Dumbledore was killed by Snape’s hand?”

“Yes.”

Remus leaned back against the booth, weariness starting to show in his face. “I don’t suppose you can tell me what it was that caused his change of heart?”

Meri thought about revealing it but she remembered Dumbledore insisting that she keep her silence on the matter. Did it really hold true now that Dumbledore was dead? Dumbledore may be dead, but Severus certainly wasn’t. “No, I’m afraid I can’t.”

Remus leaned his head on his hand and smiled. “No wonder he sought you out last night. You were his most faithful friend, despite everything that happened. I think that was what I admired most in you...your unwavering loyalty.”

Meri nodded and returned the smile. She may have been Severus most faithful friend back then but she knew she was just a fill in for who he really wanted.

After Remus left the restaurant, Meri got herself acclimated with London once again. Most things were the same from the other time but some things such as shops and the conditions of some neighborhoods were different. It wasn’t long until she found herself strolling down a familiar street not realizing she had even been in the area. And yet here she stood in the middle of the unkempt square of Grimmauld Place.

It still held it’s unfriendly air with it’s run down buildings and rubbish strewn streets. It never ceased to amaze her that this was where Sirius had grown up. Granted she had only ever come here twice but it was enough to leave a lasting impression on her. If she remembered correctly, all she had to do was stand there and think of the address, 12 Grimmauld Place, London, and the house should appear. Why she wanted to go in there she didn’t know but she ended up in front of the house for a reason.

True to her memory, the house squeezed itself between numbers 11 and 13 and she quickly headed up the steps and pushed the door open gently. For all she knew, someone still resided in the house though Remus had made no mention of it during their conversation about Sirius. Inside, it looked the same as she remembered it only with three inches of dust everywhere. She looked down at the floorboards and thought she saw footprints in the dust but before she could confirm that, there was a loud bang from up the stairs. Pulling out her wand, she noiselessly crept up the stairs to the second floor. Poking her head into all the rooms there, she found no one. Another noise came from overhead and Meri strained to hear it but couldn't quite make it out. If it wasn't for the fact that the house looked like it hadn't been lived in for months she would have turned around and gone back to the Burrow, but curiosity had gotten the better of her.

She climbed the stairs to the third floor and passed by Regulus' room which still had the plaque, though now tarnished, hanging on the door. But the sound didn't come from there either. As she approached Sirius' old bedroom she could distinguish the sound now...someone was crying. Her immediate thought was that it was Harry, come back to his godfather's house, awash with new grief now after having spent some time with him in the alternate time. Believing this was the case, she lowered her wand and opened the door.

"Hey, are you alri-" Meri stopped dead in her tracks at the scene before her. It wasn't Harry that was kneeling on the floor in front of her. It wasn't Harry who had been crying over a bit of parchment and a picture.

It was Severus Snape.

Chapter Twelve: The First of Many

Meri stood frozen on the threshold trying to process the sight before her. Severus was in a similar state, shocked into paralysis. The room was so quiet she could hear the tear drop that fell from his pale face splat against the old floorboards. It was just enough sound to start them back into motion. Well, at least one of them. Severus was on his feet and had a hold of Meri's shirt in the manner of a second. She hadn't even realized he had moved until her back connected with the hallway wall behind her.

"Not a word!" he hissed.

She noticed he was visibly shaking, whether from grief or anger, she didn't know. Perhaps it was a combination of both. He shook her again and it was enough to loosen her wits. Coming back to her senses, she shoved him from her and he stumbled back into the bedroom. "When have I ever betrayed you? Or anyone else for that matter?"

The anger in his face melted away and he turned away from her quickly. Meri gave him a moment to compose himself before stepping into the room. He had taken up a stance by the window which left the letter and picture on the floor unguarded. Meri carefully picked them up and scanned over the two pages, immediately recognizing Lily's easy handwriting style. She had been writing to Sirius thanking him for the toy broomstick he had bought Harry for his first birthday. Meri looked at the photograph to see the one year old Harry zooming around with James' legs trying to keep up and Lily herself laughing in the background. Meri sat down on the bed, a small cloud of dust rising up around her, and let out a little laugh.

"What?" Severus sounded tired but still angry.

Meri ran her fingers over the photograph. "I was so mad at Sirius for getting him this toy broom. I already had one on order when he showed up at my flat, proudly showing Remus and me what he had found. I was absolutely fuming." Meri laughed again but it died quickly. "I was the one who took this picture. All the annoyance I felt towards Sirius faded when I saw Harry zooming around on that broomstick. He nearly knocked me over as soon as I stepped through the door.

Between him on that broom and that annoying cat of theirs..." she trailed off. It was getting harder and harder to remember without falling apart. No wonder he was crying when she came in on him.

She folded up the letter and tucked the picture inside the folds. She had found a box of old pictures in her vault at Gringott's and she had picked out a handful to show Harry that night. The one she held in her hand right now wouldn't matter that much if Harry didn't see it. Getting up and brushing off the dust from her clothes, she went over to the window and held the letter and picture out to Severus. "Here, you take these."

He slowly turned his head and stared her right in the eyes. In that split second, she saw everything from Dumbledore's cursed hand, to the planning stages of Dumbledore's murder to the actual murder itself. Just as quickly as she was allowed a view into his mind, he shut her out once more. Meri nodded her head in acceptance and moved the letter closer to him. Silently, he took them from her and Meri turned to leave.

"Are you going to tell him?"

Meri turned back to face him from the doorway. "Him who?"

"Your nephew."

"Tell him what?"

"About today." He looked down at the paper in his hand. "About Lily."

"No," Meri answered. "That's your story to tell him. Besides, I know how much you hate it when someone thinks you actually have a heart."

Harry couldn't believe the treasure trove that was laid out on the Weasley living room floor. His aunt had come home around dinner time with a stack of photos all of James, Lily, Sirius, Remus and herself. They ranged from his parent's time at Hogwarts to Harry's first birthday. The fact that he now had a physical connection to that part of his life meant more to him than he could ever express.

“Here’s one you’ll appreciate,” Meri said, handing him another photo.

It was a picture of Meri and James, both in Quidditch robes with their brooms on either side of them. James was holding up a quaffle and Meri was waving her bludger at the camera. “So you both played Quidditch?”

Meri nodded. “Your father was a chaser and I was a beater. I even made captain in my seventh year but half way through the year I took a bludger to the knee and it cut my Quidditch career short.”

“How did you become a Auror with a bad knee?” Ron asked.

“It only throws off my balance on a broom because it won’t bend a certain way. I can handle a good chase, I just have to be careful of the sharp turns.”

Hermione laughed. “What in the world was going on here?”

Harry looked over his Aunt’s shoulder at the picture of her and Remus holding crickets and laughing. It amazed him how young and carefree they both looked. Apparently their joy was contagious as all of them started laughing.

“This,” Meri said wiping tears from her eyes, “was taken during our seventh year. I set the camera up on a timer because it was just the two of us.”

Ron took a closer look at the background in the picture. “That looks like the Slytherin common room.”

“It was,” Meri confirmed. “This ladies and gents was the birth of the pre-prank.”

Fred and George perked up a bit and said in unison, “The pre-prank?”

Meri nodded. “Ah yes, the pre-prank. That was my contribution to the Marauders. The pre-prank is a prank that we pulled before we did the real prank. Here,” she tapped the photo, “Peter was making a fool of himself in the Great Hall at dinner, keeping the Slytherin’s occupied.

Sirius and James were already in detention for the pre-prank, which was setting off firecrackers underneath certain Slytherin's chairs. So it was up to Remus and me to carry off the prank. We filled the Slytherin's common room with crickets and we enchanted them so that if they tried to get rid of them they would only multiply. I overheard Professor Slughorn talking to Professor Dumbledore and complaining that he didn't get any sleep that night because the chirping was so loud."

"You should hear about Fred and George's famous exit during our fifth year," Harry said. "That will go down in Hogwarts history!"

Just as the twins were about to launch into the fireworks departure from Hogwarts, a silver lynx appeared in the center of the room which silenced everyone. After a moment of complete silence, Kingsley Shacklebolt's deep voice reverberated off the walls.

"We caught a group of Death Eaters tormenting a group of muggles. We brought in all four Death Eaters but Remus was hurt very badly. We've already contacted Tonks and she's at St. Mungo's right now with him." There was a pause. "It doesn't look good."

Harry's mind was racing as the silver lynx vanished from sight. The thought of possibly losing Remus just as he was about to set out to search for the Horcruxes seemed too hard to take. He didn't know anyone else who knew defensive strategies like Remus did. And then there was Tonks, who from what he had heard, was still in the early stages of pregnancy.

"Meri!"

Harry turned towards Mr. Weasley, who had shouted for Meri. He was only able to catch sight of the corner of her shirt as she rounded the corner. Mr. Weasley was at her heels and it didn't take Harry long to catch up with them. He knew where they headed: the boundary line that surrounded the Burrow so they could apparate. No sooner had she stepped over the line then she disappeared with a "crack." Harry knew Mr. Weasley would want to decide who would go and who would stay but he didn't want to waste time right now with that and he too apparated as soon as he stepped over the boundary line.

Meri had apparated directly in front of Purge & Dowse Inc. She knew she should have been watching for muggles but she didn't care in the least at this moment. She pounded on the glass in front of the mannequin.

"Let me in! Let me in, now!"

Harry appeared out of nowhere and pushed his way in front of her. He leaned close to the glass and whispered, "We're here to see Remus Lupin." The dummy nodded its head slightly and they both stepped through the glass together. Meri rushed up to the welcome witch, a plump woman seated behind a desk.

"Remus Lupin, is he here? What floor?"

The witch checked her clipboard. "Forth Floor, Spell Damage."

Meri took off for the stairs and jumped them two at a time. She was dimly aware of Harry trying to keep up with her and she had no idea where the Weasley's were but Remus was the only one on her mind. She crashed through the doors leading to the fourth floor and skidded to a halt, taking time only to look down the hallway for a recognizable face. Kingsley Shacklebolt was standing in the hallway to her left and she jogged down to meet him.

The words to ask how Remus was doing were on the tip of her tongue but the somber look on Kingsley's face told her everything. This couldn't be happening. She had just had lunch with him that day. Was that all the time she was allotted with him now? Just a lunch...no, that couldn't be it. He would be fine. He would recover. He had to. She remembered the time she was at St. Mungo's and everyone was worried she wasn't going to pull through and she did. Surely that was what was going to happen now.

But a heart broken sob broke the silence on the ward. Instinct told her it was Tonks. She must have spoken the Auror's name because Kingsley nodded his head in affirmation. Meri was weaving on her feet and reached out blindly for anything to hold her up. The cool white wall came in contact with her hands and she rested her head

against the wall. Her vision had gone blurry but when she blinked it cleared. Crying...she was crying.

"I feel like I've done nothing but cry since I got here." That was what she had said to Remus earlier that day. That day, mere hours ago they had been talking and laughing. Someone touched her arm and she looked over to see Harry staring at her, grief and concern written on his face. James and Lily. He was a perfect mix of James and Lily. Both gone. James' face and Lily's eyes bore into her and something snapped in her mind.

A loud smack resounded through the hallway and her hand suddenly started to hurt. Looking up, there was a large dent in the wall, fist sized. Looking down at her hand she found her knuckles had been scraped and were bleeding slightly. She hadn't even realized it was her that had hit the wall. Flexing her hand, Meri tried to control her breathing but Tonk's crying filled her head once more and all that she could think about was that Remus was gone. Completely and undeniably lost to her forever.

She pushed her way past Harry, Kingsley was there to watch over him. Arthur and a handful of other red headed people came running at her and she slid easily between them and headed back down the stairs. She rushed past the welcome witch and back out into the cool London night air. She had to get away from this place. Somewhere, anywhere but here. Anytime but right now. Closing her eyes, she pictured what peace would look like and apparated. When she opened her eyes, she was standing in front of the little white church in Godric's Hollow.

Without looking out to the graveyard, she stepped through the front door of the church. It was dark inside, the priest was most likely not on duty this late at night. She slipped into the pew halfway down the aisle and stared at the flicker of the candles in the front of the church. She had sat here after Frank and Alice had been found, tortured into insanity. She had sat here, staring at the candles, whenever one of their own fell in the first war.

It was quiet in the church, no sound whatsoever but she could still hear the frantic sobs of Tonks. She thought of Remus' widow and the

child he had never seen nor ever will. She remembered how badly he wanted a family of his own but so scared to even risk having children. But he had found someone, fell in love again and had his dream in his grasp. She had a chance to see him live out his dream. But now...

She didn't know what else to do at this moment and she did something that she vowed she would never do: she bowed her head in pain and wept.

Severus felt the white hot spear of pain slice through his mind. It was everything he had in him not to wince at the time as he was standing right next to the Dark Lord. He had played out his role as best he could and the first chance he had to slip away, he went to the only place he thought she would go: the church at Godric's Hollow.

He stepped up to the window and peered through. She was the only one in there, her head bowed and shoulders shaking. He frowned deeply. He hated it whenever women cried. His mother cried a lot and no matter what he did he couldn't get her to stop. He had grown into the habit of brushing off distraught women with cold indifference. But Meri was different. She was the only ally he might have left. Deciding to give her some time, he walked out to the graveyard.

He knew who most likely was the fallen hero tonight, judging from the pain he had felt second hand in his mind. The Dark Lord was not happy about losing four of his followers but he quickly got over it. People were expendable to him. It was hard not to feel revulsion at that school of thought as he past by grave markers, some names he even recognized.

His mother's grave was located towards the back but he never came here for her. She was a lost cause to him ever since he could remember. His father had been buried in a muggle cemetery, not wanting anything to do with his wife's magical world. As if Severus needed yet another excuse to hate his father and his close mindedness. No, he only came for one person when he stepped foot in this cemetery.

It was a joined headstone and that caused him annoyance to no end. Even in death he couldn't have Lily solely, always with James

hovering close by. He leaned down in front of the marker till only her name filled his eyesight. He had so many things he wanted to say but words caught in his throat and he couldn't dislodge them. So he settled for just tracing his finger over her name.

"It was Remus."

Severus stood up slowly and turned around to see Meri standing behind him. Even in the dim light he could tell her eyes were bloodshot and puffy. Her entire frame spoke of defeat and grief. Tears were still glistening on her cheeks and he remained rooted to the spot.

"Did you hear me?" she asked, mistaking his silence for lack of understanding. "Remus-"

"I know."

Her facial expression froze and hardened. "Oh that's right. You're probably just coming from a Death Eater party celebrating his death! You're probably so happy he's gone now!"

"I can assure you, I take no joy in Lupin's death."

The comment had shocked her and the angry mask cracked a little. She looked around him and realized what grave they were standing in front of. She stepped forward and he stepped away, allowing access to both names. The look of raw grief replaced the anger and he found he could no longer look at her. Instead, he turned his eyes towards the end of the cemetery, wondering if he could see his mother's grave from here. He thought about walking back there and took two steps in that direction when a heart rending howl sounded in the night. He didn't even know a human could make a sound like that but Meri had emitted the cry and was on her knees hitting the grave marker with her bare fists. Seeing smudges appearing on the stone moved him to action.

"Stop it!" he commanded and tried to grab hold of her wrists but she was out of control at the moment. He didn't want to stun her because he would only have to talk her down later on. So he did the only other thing he knew he could do. He entered her mind.

Meri...Meri you need to calm down. Where's Harry? Is he safe?

Her thoughts were chaotic and he could only spend a few seconds in there before his own mind came over with the disorder. She had stopped fighting him and his hands were firmly around her wrists. Blood was running down her hands and her breathing was erratic but she held up her hands in a surrender sign.

"I'm fine," she panted, "I'm fine now."

He seriously doubted it but he released her anyway. True to her word, she remained as calm as possible though she still stayed kneeling in front of the graves. He listened closely and heard her breathing evening out after several minutes. She raised her hand and whispered "Scourgify" and the blood smears on the stone disappeared.

"I didn't even think they would be buried here," she said. She ran her fingers over both names, much like he had done to Lily's name. "All of them are gone now. I'm the last one." She looked up at him, her eyes shimmering with tears. "Where is Sirius buried?"

"There wasn't a body to bury."

She frowned slightly and stood up. She turned to look at him, confusion on her face. "What are you doing here?"

Why was he here? If he was honest with himself, it was because on one level he needed her trust in him. On another level, he actually cared about her feelings. The hurt she had felt, was still feeling, was overwhelming. And it was a hurt he was oh so familiar with. But he couldn't dare admit any of that to her. So he shrugged. "Coincidence." And he turned and walked back into the darkness. He would hide until he was certain she was fine and then leave. But as he was walking away he could have sworn she said something like "I think not" but he could not be certain.

Chapter Thirteen: Moving Forward

The beginning of the school term was just a week away and Harry had never felt so torn before. Ron and Hermione were anxious to start the mission that Dumbledore had given them but Harry wasn't ready to leave yet. Not with his Aunt in the condition she was in. Remus' funeral had been four days ago and she hadn't uttered one word during that time. All the laughter and telling of stories had come to abrupt stop and she had taken to locking herself in her room for hours at a time.

"I know you're worried about her, Harry, but we have something that needs to get done," Hermione was saying.

"I think you should give him a break," Ron answered, kicking a stone. "How would you feel if it was your aunt?"

Hermione started to say something but it came out in an exasperated sigh. They had taken a walk through the meadow behind the Burrow so they would be able to talk freely about the Horcruxes. However, the subject that been controlling the conversation was Meri's degenerated mental state.

"Maybe there's someone she can talk to," Hermione suggested, having found her voice again.

Harry shook his head. "There's no one now. Everyone she ever knew from back then is dead."

"Wait," Ron spoke up, "didn't you say Mad-Eye Moody was her mentor? Maybe he could talk to her."

"Somehow I don't think he would have much insight into what's she going through," Hermione said. "She needs someone who's been her friend for a long time and understand her."

"But like Harry said, everyone she knows is dead."

"She's all I have left." Harry looked up at his two friends. "She's the only family I have left. I can't just leave her like this. Look, I tried to put myself in her shoes last night and thought about what it would be

like to lose you two and Ginny and Neville. It took five minutes before I was crying myself to sleep.” The thought seemed to drop a somber cloth over the three of them. Hermione spoke up at last.

“Well, let’s think who else she would have gone to school with then.”

Harry scoffed. “Okay then, there was my Mum and Dad, Sirius and Remus, all of who are dead. Peter is the traitor so he won’t help her. She said she knew Frank and Alice Longbottom but they’re in no condition to help her. I know that Ron’s Mum has tried to talk to her but without getting any response. The only other person that I can think of that she would know is Snape and I really don’t think he’s about to have a heart to heart with her.”

“Tonks,” Ron spoke up.

Hermione sighed again. “She just lost her husband, Ron, I don’t think-”

“No,” Harry pointed towards the horizon where a figure was walking towards them. “That’s Tonks.”

They waited for her to reach them and greeted her with shaky smiles and hugs. She looked very different from what the neon haired, bubbly witch they all had come to love. Her hair had returned to the mousy brown and she looked exhausted and weary. But she managed a smile even if her “wotcher” was a little weak.

“What brings you here?” Hermione asked.

“Ron’s Mum owled me. Said she’s very concerned about Meri and wondered if I felt up to talking to her. She said she didn’t know who else to call on for help.”

“And do you feel up to talking to her?” Ron blurted out while Hermione and Harry gave him a shocked look. Tonks, however, seemed unruffled by the question.

“There’s only so much I can do now.” She patted her stomach. “I have to keep going for this little one. Besides, I’m certain that Remus would want me to try to help her if I could.”

They walked with her up to the garden wall where she was greeted by Molly Weasley with a large hug. They waited till the two women disappeared back into the house before starting back out in the meadow again. But instead of piecing together a plan for the Horcruxes, each became lost in their own thoughts, content to say nothing but just be with each other.

Tonks hated to admit to anyone that the reason she had come to the Burrow was partly because of selfish motivation. She needed someone who understood the pain of losing someone they loved. From what she knew of Meri, the woman had lost just about everyone she had loved, save Harry. She was also tired of her parents fussing over her and tip toeing around. They had even gone as far as to take down some of the pictures of her and Remus in an effort to “relieve some of her pain” as they put it. But she loved looking at the photos and had hoarded a bunch of them in her bedroom. They were a reminder that he had lived. That she had lived a fairytale for a short amount of time.

“I’m so sorry to impose on you,” Molly was saying as she walked up the narrow staircase. “I’ve tried talking to her but she just lays there and stares out the window.”

Tonks didn’t say anything but allowed Molly to ramble on about Meri’s state of mind. On her way over, she tried to think of how she could relate to the older woman. Remus had spoken of her in short phrases and it was obvious her disappearance had caused him grief. If anything, their common ground was Remus himself, and the pain was so fresh. But it would have to be the starting point because Molly had stopped in front of a closed door and knocked.

“Meri? There’s someone here to see you.”

Tonks strained to hear any sound but there was none. Molly shrugged and opened the door. The room was in a chaos. There were photographs everywhere, on the floor, chair, dressers and even scattered across the bed. Meri herself was just as Molly had described, curled up in a fetal position and staring blankly out the

window. Molly patted Tonks on the shoulder and backed out of the room.

Tonks was certain that Meri was aware of her presence there so she would just wait her out. She started picking up pictures and stacking them together. She caught brief glimpses of a young Remus and Sirius in a lot of the pictures. There were a few of a man who bore a great resemblance to Meri and realized that must have been James. There was one picture she stopped to take a look at because it was of a very young Meri and a sallow looking, hook nosed boy that was also very young but both were smiling brightly. She thought she should know who the boy was but couldn't quite place him so she shuffled it back in with the rest of the photos.

Among all the pictures, Tonks found a couple of Daily Prophets scattered about as well. There wasn't any news she hadn't heard except for the latest one that she had laying next to the bed. Tonks couldn't believe what she was reading but there it was, plain as day, complete with picture.

Severus Snape named as Hogwarts Headmaster.

She turned around and started for the stack of pictures she had just put in the corner to compare the front page picture of Snape with the photo of the young man to see if her suspicions were correct. She never got back to the pictures as Meri started to move around. By the time Tonks turned around, Meri was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking around in awe at the room. Finally her eyes rested on Tonks.

"You shouldn't be here." Meri's voice sounded hoarse, like it hadn't been used for a few days.

Tonks tossed the old paper onto a chair and sat down on the edge of the bed. "What do you mean?"

Meri rubbed her eyes. "You should, uh, be home. Resting, with family and friends."

Tonks reached out and laid a hand on Meri's arm. "Well, what makes you think I'm not with friends?"

"You hardly know me."

Tonks felt her cheek twitch and her eyes started to burn. "Remus knew you."

That was all she needed to say and Meri's face crumbled. Tonks allowed herself to cry as well and wrapped her arms around the now sobbing woman. This was why she came when Molly asked. She needed to cry with another person who understood grief. There was a camaraderie in the pain that they felt, and that brought Tonks some comfort.

The day after Tonks had come to visit, Harry was more than pleased to see his Aunt sitting at the kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee. She still looked worn and tired but she was up, dressed and apparently speaking again as Mrs. Weasley was saying, "You know, I think Fred and George have taken it on themselves to out do you and your brother and your friends. I swear, some of things those boys did at that school, I was absolutely horrified. Oh, hello Harry."

Meri glanced up and gave him a slight smile. "Hey."

He sat down next to her at the table. "Hey." He was going to ask her how she was feeling when she pushed a couple photos over to him. There were only two this time as opposed to the stack she had with her a few nights ago. He picked up the one on top and saw it was a similar photo to the one Mad Eye had of the original Order of the Phoenix. He didn't have the heart to tell her he already had one. The second one however, he had never seen. It was a picture of Remus and Meri with their arms around each other and beaming, Sirius was sitting on the arm of a couch where his parents sat holding a squirming baby on their laps.

"You never could sit still for long," Meri said quietly before looking him straight in the eye. "I guess some things don't change that much."

"What do you mean?"

"I know you and Ron and Hermione are going to be leaving soon to do the mission Dumbledore gave you. I wanted to make sure you had

these pictures with you when you left. Whenever you feel like giving up, take them out and look at them. Remember what you're fighting for."

"As long as you remember too."

Meri nodded and looked at him directly in the eyes again. "How many Horcruxes do you know about? Have you destroyed any yet?"

Shock came over him and he glanced quickly over to Mrs. Weasley who was still quietly humming to herself as she chopped up vegetables by the stove. Harry glanced back at his Aunt and found her tapping her temple with her finger and he understood. She hadn't spoken the question out loud, she had merely put it in his mind directly.

I'm a legilimens, Harry. Which is also how I know the mission Dumbledore gave you was to track down the rest of the Horcruxes. You have my word, however, that I will tell no one because I know the secrecy is very important.

Harry took a deep breath, in an effort to steady himself after hearing his Aunt's voice inside his head and also to collect his thoughts. He thought of the diary of Tom Riddle's that he had stabbed with the basilisk's tooth and she nodded her head. He then thought about the locket that he and Dumbledore had retrieved only to find it to be a fake. He also called up a vague image of Hufflepuff's cup, as well as his theory that Nagini, Voldemort's snake, might be one as well. Meri remained thoughtful for a long time before he "heard" her voice once more.

Do you have any idea where any of these things might be?

Harry shook his head.

I would check Sirius' old home at 12 Grimmauld Place. I knew Regulus, his younger brother. Regulus confided in me his doubts of being a Death Eater. Actually, confided isn't the right word, he just didn't know how to keep his mind shielded. I would ask the house elf if he knows anything about the locket. If not, at least it's a starting

point. I would leave Nagini for last since the snake is constantly at Voldemort's side.

Harry glanced back at Mrs. Weasley and found her peering over at them curiously due to the extensive silence between the two of them. "So, what are you going to do now?"

Meri smiled slightly but it quickly faded. "I'm going back to the Aurors. Tonks has resigned temporarily, most likely till after the baby is born. I'm filling her position. Arthur says the Ministry is in sad shape. Maybe I can shake things up a bit."

Harry smiled at the brash comment and he caught a glimpse of the Meri he had come to know from the pictures he had seen when she was younger. But it didn't last for very long and as quickly as it appeared it was gone and he was left looking at a grief stricken woman. But she had something to do now, she would go back to doing what she loved as an Auror. Surely that would be enough for her, wouldn't it?

Harry turned to face Mrs. Weasley. "Uh, Mrs. Weasley, I think Ron, Hermione and I will be setting out tomorrow morning."

She kept her back to him and he could tell from the tense set of her shoulders, she wasn't happy with the announcement. But she nodded her head curtly and threw the vegetables she had been chopping into a large pot of water. He looked back to Meri who patted his arm.

You'll be fine. Just make sure you keep in touch.

Harry asked how in his mind.

I have a post office box in London two blocks from the Ministry. Send it by post whenever you can. Owls will be watched, as well as a patronus. Voldemort wants to forget all things muggle related so he won't be interested in the post if we keep this quiet.

That made Harry feel better. If he needed help from someone he now had a safe way of contacted them. It also meant his Aunt really was moving forward. And tomorrow morning, so would he.

Chapter Fourteen: Under New Management

Four Months Later...

Meri couldn't believe the day she was having. She and Kingsley were a breath away from nailing Avery and possibly the Carrows, though she was finding it hard to contact Severus. With him being the headmaster, she was certain that he was busy but he had refused her owls and the last time she had seen him had been in the graveyard at Godric's Hollow. He had so completely shielded his mind from her there was no way to contact him that way either. And if that wasn't enough, the Minister had called a meeting to ask about how she had brought in a Death Eater the other day. Getting on the lift, she jabbed the button for the ninth floor.

"Rough day?"

Meri turned around to see Arthur Weasley standing in the lift. She hadn't even realized she was scowling until she forced a smile on her face. "You could say that."

"Where are you headed?"

Meri rolled her eyes. "A possible disciplinary hearing."

Arthur hid his own smile with a cough. "Because you brought in that Meadows bloke unconscious?"

"Yeah. Apparently they like to talk to them before they toss them into Azkaban. Don't see what the point is really. It's like they don't even care if the person could be innocent. What happened to the trials?"

Arthur shrugged. "Did away with them because they took up too much time."

"Unbelievable. Meadows I knew was guilty when I caught him. He had a muggle half dead in an alley way practicing his Cruciatus Curse. They don't want to throw him in Azkaban, no, they want to talk to him."

Arthur laid a hand on Meri's shoulder. "Careful. This is your third disciplinary hearing in the last four months. You're too good an Auror to have them run you out of here because of politics."

Meri sighed deeply. "It's almost as if Death Eaters have infiltrated the Ministry and are working against us. Tying our hands when we catch one of their own and demanding we catch and throw into prison the innocent ones."

"I'm afraid that may very well be the truth of the situation."

The lift dinged and the witch's voice announced, "Level Nine, Department of Mysteries."

"Someone needs to do something about it then," Meri said, stepping off the lift but holding the door back so she could still speak to Arthur. "What about the Minister?"

"Thicknesse?" Arthur shrugged. "He doesn't seem to be much of leader. We had a better chance when Scrimgeour was the Minister."

Meri nodded and waved goodbye as she headed down the hallway to the staircase that led to the sixth courtroom. Arthur had hinted before of his belief that the Ministry was either in or soon would be in the hands of Voldemort. Meri had a hard time buying that as there were so many witches and wizards involved in the organization that it seemed so terribly unlikely. She checked her watch and found she was five minutes early. Better early than late, perhaps they would go easy on her this time. But when she stepped into the room, she realized this was no disciplinary hearing.

It seemed half the Wizengamot were present as well as an odd collection of friends and foes. Dolores Umbridge sat primly in the front row, regarding Meri with a air of smugness. Meri had had some interesting run ins with that particular woman and wished desperately she could throw Umbridge in Azkaban just being an arrogant bigot. Kingsley Shacklebolt was there as well which encouraged Meri to no end. Thicknesse, of course, sat in the center seat with the various Wizengamot officials behind him.

Something familiar flitted in the back of her mind and she looked back up at all the faces before her and found what it was: Severus Snape was seated in the chair that the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot usually resided in. Whenever she had come before the Wizengamot it was always Dumbledore in that seat and it seemed to make his loss more real. Snape kept his face expressionless and his mind closed tight so she couldn't tell if he was friend or foe. Before she could think any more on the matter, Thicknesse banged the mallet to start the meeting. Meri had stood for the last three hearings without anyone ordering her to sit in the chair appointed to the defendant so she stood for this one as well.

"Meriam Anne Potter," Thicknesse started, "do you know why you are here?"

Meri squared her shoulders. "No sir, I do not."

A man sitting behind the Minister sneered at her response which Meri thought was slightly odd. Even Umbridge had maintained that annoying little smile at her response. And it wasn't far from the truth. Having so many people present for a disciplinary hearing seemed like overkill in her mind.

"It has come to the attention of those gathered here," Thicknesse said in his flat voice, "that you have used more force than necessary to apprehend those suspected of being Death Eaters."

"I can assure you, Minister," Meri started to say when he cut off as if she hadn't said anything at all.

"We have reached a decision that you should be confined to the Auror's office until further notice. You will not have any contact with any suspect from this time forward."

Meri hadn't listened to a word he said after he cut her off. She was watching the man behind Thicknesse murmuring to himself, or so she thought. Staring straight at Thicknesse she delved into his mind to find not one person in there but two. His own mind was dormant and the man behind him was whispering what he wanted the Minister to say.

Kingsley had stood up to protest the punishment but Meri held up her hand to him and sat back down. "Minister, may I say something?"

He looked up at her with slightly unfixed eyes. "Yes?"

Without any pretense, she said the counter curse and watched as confusion spread across his once emotionless face. Everyone sat still and quiet, wondering why she had uttered a counter curse, waiting to see what would happen. But when Thicknesse looked down at his clothes he jumped up from his seat. "I'm Minister?!" he exclaimed and pandemonium broke out. The man who had been sitting directly behind the Minister had bolted from his seat and was almost to the door. Meri took off after him and made it to the door just as he slipped out and down the hall.

"Incarceratus!" she shouted and thick ropes exploded from thin air and wrapped themselves around the fleeing man. He fell with a thud to the floor, spitting and cursing. Kingsley stepped forward, hauled the man up to his feet and then gave Meri a surprised look.

"I saw him whispering things into Thicknesse's ear. He showed all the signs of being-"

Kingsley pointed towards her. "Where's your wand?"

Meri patted her robes and pulled it out from her inner pocket. "Here, why?"

"You used the incarcerous spell and didn't use your wand?"

"I didn't have time to pull it out."

Whispers started to break out behind her and she could hear snippets of "didn't use a wand," "stopped him without a wand," "I couldn't have done that," "very powerful." Thicknesse came out of the room and saw the man tied up.

"Yaxley!" he exclaimed. "Out of all the people here, it was you!"

The man's face reddened. "The Dark Lord was very pleased with me! The Ministry is already in his hands!"

"He's not going to be very pleased with you now, will he?" Meri said.

"I am one of his most faithful!"

"Really?" Meri walked up to him and stared up into his hate twisted face. "How about we send you back to him and you can tell him that the Minister has been returned to his right mind. Being his most faithful I'm sure he'll welcome you with open arms."

The anger faded and it left his face almost chalk white. "No, no...don't send me back there, please! I'd rather go to Azkaban."

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Kingsley said as he pulled the whimpering man back towards the steps that lead to the lift. Meri watched them till they were out of sight and turned around to a mass of shocked and some indignant faces. Thicknesse stepped forward from the group and placed a hand on Meri's arm.

"I was hoping you and Kingsley have time to meet with me later on."

"Of course," Meri answered.

Thicknesse moved down the hallway and the Wizengamot slowly followed him out. Meri moved out of their way and nodded to them as they passed, all thoughts of her disciplinary hearing out of their minds. When the last one disappeared up the stairs, she slid down the wall and sat on the floor. She needed time to process the events that had happened. Apparently, Arthur was right about the Ministry being in a bad way concerning Death Eaters. Surely there were more legilimens out there than just her. Why hadn't anyone else noticed that the Minister wasn't himself?

"I would imagine you're very proud of yourself at the moment."

Meri looked up to see Severus standing over her with his unreadable face and cold eyes. "Oh, you're talking to me now? I wasn't aware of that. My apologies."

His mouth twitched in a half smile. "It's been...interesting at the school."

"I can imagine. From what I remember, Professor Flitwick can be a handful."

He pulled his wand out and waved in a circle. Meri felt the muffliato charm fall around them. "You have no idea what I've been dealing with."

Meri grinned. "You're right, I don't. It may have something to do with you refusing my owls and locking up that intriguing mind of yours. Know what I've been doing? Catching all your old buddies from school. We're just about ready to go snatch Avery. The Carrows are next on my list."

"Wonderful," he replied. "They've been nothing but a headache at the school. You'd be doing me a favor."

"You're the headmaster now, why did you even put them in a teaching position?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Having one of the Dark Lord's most faithful servants at Hogwarts and not appointing some of his followers would be suicidal."

"Why the Carrows?"

"They were the most...innocuous of all the Death Eaters."

"You do realize that burning a candle at both ends means you're going to get burnt, Sev."

"Thank you for your concern. The reason why I stayed behind was to warn you about what the Minister is going to ask you to do. While you were busy taking down Yaxley, I monitored Thicknesse's thoughts."

Meri stretched out her legs and crossed her arms. "And? He's not going to ask me to work with Umbridge, is he?"

"As entertaining as that might be, no. He felt guilt over being so vulnerable to the imperious curse that he doesn't want to face the public. He's probably writing his resignation now."

“What does this have to do with me?”

“By Merlin’s beard, you’re dense.”

“Apparently, you’re rubbing off on me.”

“The point,” he hissed, “is that he was impressed with your actions today. The fact that you realized something was wrong and fixed it. Then there was that incident of wandless magic you pulled off which means you have a decent amount of power. He’s most likely reading over files at the moment. He’ll appoint Shacklebolt as Minister given he’s head Auror at the moment. With that position open, he’ll ask you to take Shacklebolt’s place.”

Meri frowned. “Why me? I’ve only been back for four months.”

“You were trained by Alastor Moody. Since Moody’s retired and Tonks, his last protégé, is on leave, you are the only logical choice. Besides,” Snape gave a half sneer, “you claim to have come from a time where the Dark Lord ruled and you survived for sixteen years. If that were true, I would appoint you as Head Auror as well.”

Meri’s eyes narrowed to slits. “What do you mean ‘if’ that were true?”

“I’m not the only one who’s keeping their mind locked up.”

“Fine,” she acquiesced. “When we have time to shoot the breeze I’ll be sure to fill you in on everything that happened there. Be prepared for a lot of James, Sirius and Remus because they were alive there.”

A muscle twitched in Snape’s cheek but he remained silent.

“Alright, if you’re right about this,” Meri stood up from the floor, “what do I do about you and the Carrows? Kingsley would like nothing more than to toss you and the Carrows into Azkaban and put Hogwarts in McGonagall’s hands.”

He shrugged. “Then you come after us. Personally, I would love nothing more than to hand the school over to McGonagall and get the Carrows out but I still have to stay in the Dark Lord’s good books. If you come, I will put up a fight.”

“Wonderful. Nothing like beating up an ally.”

Snape waved his wand and the muffliato charm broke. “Miss Potter.”

“Headmaster.”

She watched Snape as he walked down the hall and disappeared up the stairs. She thought it was such a waste of time keeping everyone in the Order ignorant of who’s side he was really on. As far as she knew, his only confident was her and having only one person who you trust implicitly was never good.

“You alright?”

Meri looked up to see Kingsley had returned. “I’m fine, why?”

“Snape just passed me and he looked murderous.”

Meri gave him a smile. “He always looks like that.”

Kingsley gave her a stern look. “I was a little concerned seeing you here by yourself with him still lurking around here. It’s why I came back down.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve been dealing with him since my first year at Hogwarts.”

“Speaking of Hogwarts,” Kingsley said as they started back up to the Auror office, “we really need to do something about Snape and the Carrows. Now that Thicknesse is released from the Imperious curse we may be able to convince him of going into the school and arresting them all.”

Meri chewed on her lower lip. She knew Snape was doing his best at keeping the students safe. But the situation was still lose/lose for Snape: either they would arrest him and he would be sent to Azkaban or he would flee and suffer punishment from Voldemort for abandoning his post. Voldemort would not be pleased to lose both the Ministry and Hogwarts. She needed more time to think about the situation and see if there wasn’t a win situation for them so she changed the subject.

"Thicknesse said he wanted to meet us later on."

"Really? Did he say about what?"

Meri shrugged. "I don't know."

Harry sat in the tent and listened to the rain pelt the top and sides of the canvas. They had found the locket, thanks to some useful help from Kreacher, but how to destroy it was still a problem. He didn't like how it was affecting them even for the short amount of time that they took turns wearing it. Ron in particular seemed to be having a hard time with it which only made Harry want to find a solution even more.

"You'll never believe this!" Hermione exclaimed as she burst through the tent flaps. She dropped the food she had scavenged on the threadbare carpet before pulling out a two day old Daily Prophet. "Listen to this, 'A new minister was appointed this morning to replace Pius Thicknesse, who was found to be under the imperious curse which was cast by a Death Eater, Alex Yaxley. The new minister, Head Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt, officially took office as of noon today and promised that the Ministry would continue to stand for what it had originally been founded for: equality, unity and freedom in the wizarding world. He vowed that the Dark Lord's reign of terror will be quickly coming to a close.'"

"Blimey," Ron exclaimed. Harry felt the same way, thrilled that the Ministry was back in the Order's hands. Perhaps now it would be enough to gather forces to fight Voldemort more efficiently.

"Wait, there's more," Hermione said, turning to one of the inside pages. She was practically jumping up and down in glee. "'To replace Shacklebolt as Head Auror is Meriam Potter. She has claimed to have lived in a world ruled by You-Know-Who for the last sixteen years and promises to not rest until the Dark Lord has fallen.'" Harry's hopes rose higher at that news. She was alive and now with a very clear purpose.

"Dolores Umbridge has been dealt a particularly hard blow as her Muggle-Born Registration Committee has been permanently disbanded. The statue in the Atrium has already been ordered to be

taken down and a new one is under construction. There has also been talk of the new Minister re-evaluating the way the Ministry deals with magical beasts, such as centaurs, vampires and werewolves.”

Ron laughed. “I would have loved to see the look on Umbridge’s face when they came in there and got rid of her blood status division.”

Harry and Hermione laughed as well, trying to do their best impressions of their old Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher. It was the first time in a very long time that Harry could remember them laughing together. He enjoyed every second of it and found his spirits lightened enormously as he gazed down at Kingsley and his Aunt’s picture on the front of the paper where they were standing in the Atrium of the Ministry, waving and smiling. It was the first sprig of hope that he had felt since Dumbledore’s death and he latched onto it with all his might.

Chapter Fifteen: Second Flight of the Prince

Severus knew that he only had a few days to prepare for Shackbolt and Meri to show up at the school gates. He had already spoken to the Carrows about the possibility of the arrest. He had also sent a message to the Dark Lord voicing his concerns. His response was short: *Fight*. As if he didn't have enough on his mind already, the Daily Prophet had landed on his desk with another disconcerting, albeit predictable, issue.

"And what does the Prophet have to say today, Severus?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose. There were times when he appreciated the presence of Dumbledore in the portrait and others when he sincerely wished for quiet. "Apparently, they're trying to dig up dirt on Meri. There was a front page article regaling her less than admirable escapades."

"Really?" the portrait said, "did they manage to fit the story of her and the mishap with the goblin?"

Severus turned around. "No, I think they left that out."

"Pity, I rather liked that story. Have you ever heard it, Severus?"

"No, I have not and I would prefer it stay that way."

"Very well," Dumbledore said, "what does the article say?"

Severus frowned deeply. "They're looking in to her apparent suicide attempt in the middle of her sixth year."

"Ah, yes. I remember that well. It frightened many people."

"So it did happen?" Severus asked, crossing his arms across his chest. "I never got a straight answer from anyone concerning that event." He hated to admit it but not knowing what happened to Meri during her sixth year unnerved him greatly. They had continued with their private lessons with legilimency and occulmency with Dumbledore but whatever had happened she had completely shut away from him.

Dumbledore had fallen into one of his quiet, pensive moods so Severus allowed him time. Perhaps he would finally learn the truth as to what happened. Finally, the former Headmaster shifted in the frame.

“Severus, I believe it is prudent for you know the circumstances that drove Meri to do what she did. I’m sure the Daily Prophet will be throwing all kinds of speculation on the subject. Given the fact that I won’t be able to communicate with you after the next day or so, now is the time for you know. There is a bottle in the Pensieve cabinet labeled ‘MP 1978.’”

Severus went to the cabinet and moved some of the bottles around till he found a small amber bottle with the label that Dumbledore told him to look for. He pulled it out and found the silvery material of a memory floating around inside. He opened the bottle and dumped it into the Pensieve before carrying the stone basin over to the desk. He stared down into the swirling liquid feeling almost guilty.

Meri and he had both shown signs of legilimency and occulmency in her third year and his fourth. Dumbledore kept getting reports of the two of them predicting surprise tests, his faster than normal reflexes and her abnormal precision on the Quidditch field. Dumbledore himself had started teaching them how to control these gifts and use them in tandem. They had spent three years running around in each other’s minds, knowing the ins and outs of each other’s thoughts and feelings. It was the ultimate invasion in his mind to view this memory that she had kept hidden for so long. But Dumbledore had granted permission and curiosity got the best of him. With a deep breath, he fell head first into the stone basin.

He landed back in Dumbledore’s office and at first thought he hadn’t even entered into the Pensieve. But when everything came into focus, he saw a younger looking Dumbledore seated behind his desk, an immense look of sympathy on his face. Turning slightly, he saw a sixteen year old Meri, curled up in a fetal position on the chair across from Dumbledore.

She had wet tracks on extremely pale cheeks with black smudges under her eyes. Her thinness, skin color, red-rimmed eyes and shaky hands all spoke of a poison attempt, hemlock, possibly. So that was how she tried to kill herself. It would explain the lengthy stay she had in St. Mungo's that Christmas holiday.

"Meri?" Dumbledore's voice was quiet and soft but Meri jumped as if he had shouted at her. He tried again, "Meri, why?"

She took a shuddering breath and more tears rolled down her face. "I can't...I can't say."

"Why not? Your family is very concerned about you, James especially. Your friends as well, Remus, Lily, Mary, even Severus is worried."

She gave him a disbelieving look before returning her eyes to her trembling hands. "What about my mum?"

"What about her?"

Meri swallowed forcibly. "Is she alright?"

"As far as I know. Why the concern over her?"

She rubbed her forehead, something that Severus had come to know as a tick whenever she was frustrated or felt like she was backed into a corner. "I don't want to say...I can't tell..."

"Meri, secrets create a cage around us. The more secrets you keep, the more you find you can not move." The headmaster leaned across the desk and fixed Meri with a steady but compassionate stare. "I've lived a very long time and I can assure you, anything you say will not shock or disgust me. I've seen the kind of person you are and nothing can make me believe you are anything but brave, intelligent and kind hearted."

Severus watched Meri's face as frustration gave way to fear and ultimately, shame. After many minutes of deliberation, she finally started to speak.

"I was, I was going through the exercises that you assigned to us over the holiday and, and," her lower lip trembled, "and I was so stupid."

"I highly doubt that," Dumbledore passed her a white handkerchief which she took with shaky hands. "What happened then?"

"I thought that I could possibly reach Sev. I know where he lives so I knew the distance it would take and the concentration. I know what his mind feels like so...I tried."

Dumbledore nodded his head slowly. "It wasn't Severus' mind that you saw, was it?"

Meri shook her head. "It was my, my mum's. She was having a nightmare and everything was happening so quickly. By the time I got control back," she closed her eyes, "I had seen everything."

Silence fell in the room with only the ticking of a clock and Fawkes clicking his beak. Severus found he had been holding his breath, waiting for "everything" to be explained. After several minutes, Dumbledore finally shifted in his chair, his face deadly serious.

"I assume you mean your mother's capture by the Death Eaters shortly after James was born?"

Meri nodded her head miserably and Severus couldn't believe he didn't know this piece of information. But it still didn't account for her attempted end of her life. There had to be something else to this and sure enough, Meri added more detail.

"Sir, I, uh, I don't...don't know how to t-tell you..." she broke off in a ragged sigh.

"Take your time."

Meri moved from her fetal position and put her feet on the floor, her hands gripping the armrests of the chair so tightly both her hands were white from the effort. Her eyes remained fixed on the floor still and Severus could see tears dripping off the end of her nose. She

was trembling from head to toe and when she spoke her voice wavered as well.

“When my mum was having her nightmare, I saw...I saw You-Know-Who,” she swallowed with great effort, “I saw him attack my mum. I saw him...”

Dumbledore had risen from his chair and made his way over to Meri. He knelt down in front of her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “I know.”

Meri shook her head violently. “No, you don’t. After I got control I went to her and I asked her...I asked her if she knew who...who my father was.” Meri stood up with such force the chair was knocked back and Dumbledore was forced to release her shoulders. Meri looked deranged, wild-eyed and heaving. “She said she couldn’t be sure! She said she never could be sure!” She grabbed fistfuls of her curly black hair and howled, falling to her knees sobbing. “Oh God,” she moaned, “I could be his child. I could be You-Know-Who’s daughter!”

Dumbledore rushed over to where Meri had fallen and wrapped his arms around her, rocking her back and forth. It was a long time before she had quieted enough for Dumbledore to speak again.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, Meri. But believe me when I say that who our parents are do not determine who we become. Your mother and father love you and James so much and, I daresay, they have never treated you differently or shown signs of favoritism.”

Meri shook her head slightly.

“Your mother wanted to keep this secret from you because she was afraid you would feel less like her daughter and that was the last thing she wanted you to feel. As far as your parents are concerned, you are their daughter and will always remain so.”

He watched as the scene shift and felt himself come out of the Pensieve...

Severus found himself leaning over the desk, trying to process the revelation that had just been given to him. He turned and stared at the spot on the carpet where Meri had once knelt and sobbed over her dubious parentage. No wonder she had tried to take her own life. It was known across the school that James Potter hated anything to do with the Dark Arts. What would have been his reaction had he known his own sister might be the child of one of the most powerful Dark Wizards of the time?

“The Prophet will get it correct one day, if they’re already reporting her suicide attempt,” Dumbledore said quietly. “I wanted you to know the real reason so when it comes out and Meri is forced from the Auror office, you need to find her.”

“Me? Why me?”

“Meri was right in thinking that she could reach you despite the distance. You know each other’s minds so well, with a good deal of concentration you should be able to find her location if she is forced underground. And you must. Having this family secret aired so publicly will only force her back into her self-destructive nature, especially after losing Remus not that long ago. I fear she may try to take her life again and that is the last thing the Order and Harry needs right now.”

He wasn’t that thrilled about this new assignment, babysitter to James Potter’s little sister, on top of trying to stay alive in his role as double agent. “Do you think there is any truth in her being the Dark Lord’s daughter?”

Dumbledore sighed wearily. “There are some similarities between Tom Riddle and Meriam Potter, yes. They both have a significant amount of charisma and magical capabilities. I also researched her family history and there are no mentions of legilimens or occulemens. And,” the portrait paused briefly, “the way they hold their wands is identical.”

Meri knew she was walking into a fight as the large entrance doors of Hogwarts came into view. She was to accompany Kingsley and Dawlish, who had been one of many to be removed from the

Imperious curse, to arrest Snape and the Carrows. They were chosen to do the actual arrest because they made up the three strongest wizards found in the Ministry at the moment.

Kingsley had suffered immense dissatisfaction with many witches and wizards, which Meri had pointed out, made their job easier in finding out where the death eaters were hiding themselves in the Ministry ranks. Thankfully, Dolores Umbridge handed in her resignation and went into early retirement. Many followed her, either resigning and taking short vacations or following Umbridge's example and going into retirement. It had thinned their numbers enormously but Kingsley remained optimistic that radical change had to occur first before things would turn in their favor. She hoped he was right.

Professor McGonagall met them at the entrance hall, her back stiff and her lips pressed into a thin line. "Minister, Mr. Dawlish, Ms. Potter."

They nodded back to her as Kingsley addressed her. "Do you know where they are?"

"Snape is in the Headmaster's office. The sooner you get him out the better. The Carrow's, I believe may be with him."

Meri followed behind Kingsley and Dawlish as they made their way to the Headmaster's office. They passed by the Great Hall where a group of students were in an after hours study hall and they all looked up as McGonagall passed and gave the three Ministry workers curious glances. Two students got up from their table, Gryffindor if Meri saw correctly, and ran to the doors of the Great Hall. Meri looked over her shoulder and recognized Ginny Weasley as one of the students but she didn't know the boy, though he did look vaguely familiar.

"Meri," Ginny called.

She stopped and Ginny and the boy ran out into the hallway to see her. She looked over to see that McGonagall had stopped but gave her a curt nod to let her know that the distraction was permitted. "Hey, Ginny. How are you?"

"Fine, have you heard from Harry, Ron and Hermione at all?"

She wondered if she should tell them that she had. Harry had written her a letter that she got two days ago in the muggle post. It had been short but assured her they all were safe, healthy and fed. "I'm sure he's fine, Ginny."

"You have heard, haven't you?" the boy spoke up.

"And you are?"

"Oh," he stuck out his hand, "Neville Longbottom."

That was why he looked familiar: he favored his mum. Meri lowered her voice. "What makes you think I've heard from them?"

He did the same. "You paused before you answered."

Meri gave him a smile. "You're just like your Dad. Good work. As of five days ago, they were fine."

Neither one of them asked how she knew this but merely smiled broadly. Meri gave Ginny a brief hug and patted Neville's shoulder. "You better get back to studying. Good luck." She watched them disappear back into the Great Hall before returning to the group. It was a quiet, almost eerie walk through the school that brought back good and bad memories for her, but all of them hurt to remember. It wasn't until they reached the floor where the Head Master's office is located that things got interesting very quickly.

As soon as they stepped foot in the hallway a flash of bright light blinded them. Aiming in front of her, Meri sent a shield charm to block the entire group. Thankfully it held as her sight came back and she caught just the tip of three cloaks disappearing around the corner of the hallway. Severus wasn't kidding when he said he would put up a fight.

"Stay here," Meri said as she ran past McGonagall. She really didn't want the now current Headmistress hurt in the scuffle. She could hear Kingsley and Dawlish behind her as they covered the rest of the hallway in a matter of seconds and shot around the corner. The

hallway was longer than the one they had left and all three people were still in sight. Meri sent a stunning charm but it hit a suit of armor instead, knocking it over. An idea occurred to her and she hit another suit of armor further up the hallway. As it fell it took out one of the Carrows and with a quick flick of her wand, Meri had one of them bound on the floor.

She was starting to plan the next attack when a jet of red light passed over her shoulder. She heard someone fall behind her and glanced back to see Kingsley still standing so it must have been Dawlish who went down. By the time she turned back around all Meri could see was red before everything went black.

Severus apparated in front of the Malfoy's front gate. He wasn't ready to show his face yet to the Death Eaters gathered in the sprawling mansion, so he opted for catching his breath propped up against the boundary wall. This was the second time he had fled the only place that ever remotely felt like a home. Now, he faced a possible painful future at the hands of the Dark Lord for being chased out of the school.

He could just make a run for it but without anywhere to go it didn't seem like a productive plan, especially since the Order thought he was an enemy and the Death Eaters would see him as a deserter. Dumbledore wanted him to remain in Voldemort's camp for as long as possible so that only left him with the choice of facing punishment and being reassigned.

With a resigned sigh, he pushed himself off the wall and took a steadying breath. With a hand on the gate, a crack sounded behind him. He turned around to see the squat, lumpy form of Amicus Carrow shuffling through the darkness. As he neared, Severus could hear the wheezy giggle coming every now and again and see that the Carrow was dragging something behind him.

"Amicus?"

The wheezy giggle came again. "No punishment for us tonight, Snape!"

“What?”

Amycus threw whatever he was dragging at Snape’s feet. It looked like nothing more than a mess of robes. Using the toe of his boot, Severus pushed the bundle over and saw Meri’s pale face in the dim moonlight. Amycus was still gasping with delight.

“I went back after they got Alecto and snatched this one. The Dark Lord should be pleased with this one. Head Auror, ha!” Amycus spit in Meri’s direction and continued his laughing. Severus wasn’t sure what to do now. He could knock out Amycus, take Meri and go on the run but that would compromise both of their positions. He could deliver her to the Dark Lord as penance for abandoning his post but it could mean Meri’s death in the process. Dumbledore’s order of keeping Meri alive echoed in his head until Bellatrix’s voice drowned it out.

“What do we have here?” she said, stepping through the gate. When she saw the face, she broke out in a delighted laugh. “Meri Potter! Potter’s Aunt! The Dark Lord will be very pleased! Itty Bitty Potter will have to show himself now!”

Severus watched as Bellatrix ran back down the pathway to the mansion, yelling the announcement that he and Amycus had brought Meri Potter with them. His mind was racing, each plan of escape as improbable as the next. He bent down to pick up the unconscious form when he felt Amycus’ wand at his throat.

“I brought her. I carry her in.”

“You can’t carry her.”

“I got her here.”

“You drug her here. The Dark Lord will need her in one piece.”

Amycus seemed to think about that and reluctantly stepped back. “Fine. But I’m the one that tells him I got her.”

“Fine,” Severus snapped as he hoisted Meri over his shoulder and started down the lane towards the house. As soon as the doors were

in sight, they opened and Voldemort stepped down to greet them, his followers spilling out into the night around him.

“Is it true, Severus?” he asked. “Is that Meriam Potter?”

Severus swallowed. “Yes, my lord.”

A wide smile broke out across Voldemort’s snake like face and he opened his arms like he was welcoming home a relative. “Severus, I can always count on you to please me.”

Chapter Sixteen: The Prodigal Returns

Meri woke up with a terribly headache. She tried to open her eyes but any little movement sent pain shooting through her skull. She flexed her fingers and found something soft underneath them. A rug, and an expensive one at that. Her hearing was coming back and she could make out the crackle of fire and the low murmur of voices. She tried to open her eyes again when her head started hurting again, only this time it was from an invasion.

"Stay down."

"Sev?"

"You're in the Malfoy Manor, surrounded by Death Eaters. Don't be a hero."

A flash of anger coursed through her. *"What do you care?"*

"I do..." There was a pause. "I do care. So stay down."

Meri followed his advice and tried to stay still. But then she heard the snake moving across the floor towards her. She didn't do snakes. Opening her eyes, she waited for them to adjust and slowly things were coming into focus. Just as she was starting to feel normal, a cold, high voice cut through the air.

"Good evening, Miss Potter."

Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she pushed herself up off the ornate rug and face the people sitting at a long, high polished table. Voldemort was seated at the center with Severus to his right and Bellatrix to his left. She recognized a couple of the other faces, like Lucius, Narcissa, Avery and Dolohov. Meri tried to look confident and unafraid despite the fact she was outnumbered about fifteen to one.

"Evening," she said, thankful her voice didn't shake.

"And how are you doing?" Voldemort asked. *"It's been a very long time since I've seen you last."*

“Not long enough for me.” She felt the snake rub against her ankle and she flinched.

“Don’t worry, Meriam,” Voldemort said. “Nagini is just welcoming you. There’s someone else here who would like to welcome you. Wormtail, stop cowering and greet your old friend. With James, Sirius and Remus gone now, I’m sure she is just dying to see you.”

Meri watched and one of the Death Eaters shoved a small, cowering man into her vicinity. She barely recognized Peter Pettigrew, thin, balding and rat faced. He was whimpering and wringing his hands together, one of which looked like it was encased in silver. He looked nothing like the Peter she had been around for the last sixteen years and she almost broke right then.

“Someone return Miss Potter’s wand to her,” Voldemort commanded. Severus rose from his seat and walked around the table. She tried to find his eyes as he handed her her wand but he kept his eyes averted and his mind closed. She didn’t expect any help from him honestly. He had a reputation to keep up and she would do her best to help him do that. Besides, she had some unfinished business with Pettigrew. But now wasn’t the time for it.

“Hello, Peter.”

“M-Meri.”

She didn’t really know what they expected from her. Knowing them as she did, they would want a show, entertainment in the form of violence. She wasn’t about to give it to them, regardless of how she felt towards the watery-eyed man in front of her. She folded her hands in front of her, wand pointed at the ground. Pettigrew looked over at Voldemort and then back to her, not sure what to do either. Finally, Voldemort grew bored with the inaction.

“Wormtail, sit down. Perhaps later on tonight Meriam will feel a little more vengeful. I wish to watch something more exciting than this. A duel, I believe.”

Bellatrix laughed with delight, looking at Voldemort with undisguised excitement. “My Lord, please, let me-”

He raised a pale, long fingered hand. "Maybe later on. I believe Severus should be the one to duel her. He was the one that brought her here."

"No, he's not!" Amycus Carrow stood up from near the end of the table. "I was the one who brought her! I should be the one to duel her!"

"Amycus, if I allow you to duel with Meriam here, it would not be very entertaining. You wouldn't last two minutes with her. Severus," Voldemort motioned towards Meri. "If you wouldn't mind."

It was a test then. Voldemort was testing Severus' allegiance. This was going to take some fantastic acting or some actual blood spilling. This time as he walked towards, she felt a sliver of his mind open to her. Unlike Voldemort and most legilimens, they didn't need to look in each other's eyes to speak to each other.

"Remember the prank we pulled on my brother and his friends?" She asked him.

"The one with the protego charm that we altered?"

"That's the one." They raised their wands and swished them so they pointed to the ground before turning their backs to each other. *"Hit me with your best."*

During one of their occulemency lessons, Severus had found out a prank that James, Sirius and Remus were going to pull on him. It was quiet simple, actually. They would set up a "haunted hallway" on the way down to the Slytherin common room. Meri had planned on jumping out and hitting him with a hex, to be determined that night, and just all out frightening him. In an effort to make peace, she suggested they work together (Dumbledore required at least one project a semester that they had to work together on) to alter the protego charm to actually shield a person's body without showing the shield. It took them three weeks but they managed it. When the time for the prank came, Meri jumped out with a yell and Severus hit her with the crucio curse, only she was protected by the altered protego charm. She writhed and screamed on the floor, causing James and company to jump from their hiding spaces. James didn't talk to her for

a week, Sirius was only half mad at her and Remus thought it was a brilliant idea. She hoped it would save her now.

They walked the required paces and turned, wands raised. Severus still had the sliver of his mind open to her and told her what he was going to cast.

“Stupify!”

Meri flicked her wand and blocked it. “Expelliarmus!”

Severus knew what was coming, she had let him know, and he blocked it easily. That was the easy part of the duel, now the big spells were about to come out.

“Rictusempra!”

Meri barely blocked the spell in time. Apparently Severus was through giving her warnings. Well, two could play at the game. Just for kicks, she threw a tickling charm at him. He lazily waved his wand and gave her a confused look. She shrugged and tried again with a stinging hex and caught him on the leg. He scowled and shook it off and sent a nonverbal spell her way. At first she thought it had missed but looking down she saw the hem of her robe had caught fire and was quickly spreading. Without thinking, she stripped off her cloak and stepped on it, vanquishing the flames. Now she was just in jeans and a t-shirt, not a whole lot of protection now.

“That was a good robe, you insufferable git!”

“My apologies,” he responded though his tone sounded anything but apologetic.

At the moment, she didn’t care if he was trying to save face in front of Voldemort. She had some precious artifacts in that robe that she would have to recover now before one of the Death Eaters did the job for her. He had hit a sore spot and she was about to let him know it. Without stopping, she threw a series of stinging hexes which caught him on the calf, arm and neck, and she ended the barrage with another disarming charm that hit him squarely in the chest, sending him to the floor. His face looked livid.

Without any warning, she felt her legs sweep out from underneath her and she hit the floor hard. Apparently he wasn't the only one who was annoyed. As he stood, he flicked his wand again and it felt like a hot whip struck her across her chest. Meri stayed down, catching her breath as Severus staggered to his feet. The kid gloves were off now. Meri jumped up from the floor and hurled the strongest disarming charm she knew, but Severus barely ducked it.

"Here it comes," he warned her mentally before shouting, "Crucio!"

Meri felt the spell hit her but the altered protego charm did its job and protected her. She allowed the force of the spell to knock her to the ground and she screamed and writhed. The Death Eaters broke out in cheers and applause while Meri lay on the carpet panting. After a few seconds, she pushed herself up and swayed on her feet slightly.

"Go to the left," he said again and Meri mentally groaned. She was never good with left and right, a weakness that she was never able to overcome. But before she had time to figure out what was left and right, she heard "Sectumsepra" yelled and she jumped to the side hoping it was to the left. An intense white hot pain issued from her temple down to her jaw and all she could see was red and all she could hear was a high pitch scream. It wasn't until she fell to the floor, her hands covering her bloody face that she realized it was her screaming.

He wanted to scream at her. How stupid could a grown woman be that she couldn't tell her left from her right. But he couldn't. He had to look pleased with himself while the person Dumbledore told him to keep alive was trying to hold her slashed face together. His "companions" were cheering and applauding his move but all he could feel was sick to his stomach.

Voldemort stood up from the table and silence fell on the room. Well, almost silence, Meri was half way sobbing. He couldn't imagine what the pain must feel like, let alone the fear. He had basically blinded her in the midst of her enemies. He watched Voldemort make his way around the table with slow and deliberate steps. When he entered the make shift dueling circle, Severus had no choice but to back out. Meri's fate was out of his hands now.

"I had expected better from you, Meriam," Voldemort said silkily. "I had expected a child of mine to duel with more ferociousness."

A murmur of confusion rippled through the room. Even though Severus had just learned of that secret, the shock of it came back and made playing his part in this whole ordeal slightly easier. He took a tentative step forward, towards Voldemort. "My Lord?"

"Yes," Voldemort said, getting down on one knee in front of Meri. "An unfortunate lapse in judgment on my part but I had hoped it would prove beneficial in the end." He pulled out his wand and waved it front of her face. The gash partial healed up and Meri quickly wiped her face on her sleeve so she could see again.

"But," Voldemort continued, "perhaps she can still be useful."

Severus watched as Meri's face twisted into a sneer. "Useful to you? I'd rather die."

"And I would love to be the one to do that, but for now, I need you alive. You see, your nephew will not show himself unless he thinks a loved one is in danger. He risked life and limb to show up at the Department of Mysteries when he thought his dear godfather was being tortured. I can only imagine what he will do when you actually are."

A flicker of fear passed across her face but she quickly hid it. "I'm sure Harry has smartened up since then. He knows the importance of defeating you at any cost."

"Perhaps," Voldemort held up his wand again, "which brings me to another part of my plan. I was most upset that the Ministry was lost to me. You take something from me, I take something from you."

Severus didn't know what was about to happen until it did and it caused his stomach to roll. Voldemort's free hand had closed around Meri's left wrist and he cast a binding spell on her. All she could do was sit there as Voldemort burned the Dark Mark into her arm. A cruel smile touched Voldemort's face.

“Let’s see how the Ministry welcomes back their Head Auror who is now sporting the Dark Mark.” He released the binding spell and Meri fell forward on the carpet, cradling her left arm, blood still dripping from her face. Voldemort stood up and turned towards his jeering followers. “Narcissa, would you should Miss Potter to her room for the night. With a murderer like me on the loose, I’m sure the Ministry will need her very soon. Severus, you’ve done exceeding well. The night is yours.”

Severus nodded his head and immediately left the room. He headed up the main stairs of the Manor and found the first bathroom. No sooner did he shut the door then the contents of his stomach made a reappearance. Even in death, Dumbledore was still demanding things from him that he was finding extremely hard to carry through. He thought it would all end when he killed the former Headmaster, but no, the portrait had been hung in the office and more orders were issued. He didn’t know how much more he could take at this point.

When he was certain he was done vomiting, he laid down on the cool stone floor and closed his eyes. He was tired, oh so tired and wanted nothing more than to just sleep. But he couldn’t risk it here, not around Voldemort. He had to keep his mental shields up. He had risked his exposure opening his mind to Meri the way he had but Voldemort was more interested in Meri at that point, not him.

He wasn’t sure how long he spent laying on the floor, but he heard Narcissa move past the door with Meri in tow. He was certain it was her from the stumbling down the hallway. He waited a few seconds before standing up and opening the door. He looked around the corner and saw which door Narcissa opened for Meri, who staggered across the threshold and fell with a thud. Severus saw a brief flicker of compassion on Narcissa’s face and suddenly he wondered if he could persuade her to be another ally. It could mean getting Meri out here before any more damage was done to her.

The only problem was that it would expose him as a spy. However, Dumbledore seemed to think that keeping Meri alive was the most important thing right now which meant his spying days were numbered. He couldn’t help but feel a slight relief at that thought. He could go back to being normal, or at least, what passed for normal

where his life was concerned. He only hoped he could get both of them out of Malfoy Manor alive.

“Severus.”

He turned abruptly to see Narcissa standing next to him with a shrewd look on her pale face. “Yes?”

“I know...” she swallowed, “I figured you would be the one that takes her back.”

He feigned confusion. “Her?”

Color rose to her face. “Do not play mind games with me. You followed through with the unbreakable vow and protected Draco last year. You are most trusted by the Dark Lord so he will only trust you with Meri Potter. When you take her back to the Ministry, take Draco with you.”

“What?” This time he didn’t have to feign confusion.

“I’m afraid Draco will not see the end of this war. He’s too, Merlin forgive me, he’s too weak, too frightened. Take him, Severus. Protect him, hide him, I don’t care. Just make sure he lives through this.”

“I will not make another unbreakable vow.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to. Just your word will be good enough.”

Going on the run with Meri was going to be hard enough, having Draco Malfoy in tow was going to be even more difficult. But Narcissa’s plea, the plea of a mother, touched him despite the fact that he couldn’t show a trace of it. Voldemort didn’t listen to Lily’s plea to spare Harry, so Severus refused to abandon another mother who was pleading for her son to be spared.

He forced a displeased frown on his face. “Tell him to be ready to leave when I am.”

Chapter Seventeen: Dreams and Visions

Meri had watched Severus leave the room through a haze of pain and shock. A pang of hurt hit her as she felt he was abandoning her but then she focused on the faces around her and realized, he was still protecting himself. She barely registered Voldemort's request to Narcissa to take her up to her room. Meri reached blindly around her, searching for her robe. She didn't want them taking that. She felt the soft cloth come into contact with her hand and blinking blood and sweat out her eyes, she saw it was Pettigrew. She gathered her mind and looked him in the watery eyes, trying to figure out what he was thinking.

"Maybe she doesn't know yet...doesn't know I was secret keeper..." and Meri couldn't listen anymore. She swayed to her feet, feeling awfully light headed but followed the hem of the pale colored robes ahead of her. She managed to get up the wide stairs with only stopping twice and stumbled her way down a hallway. The hem of her burnt robe kept dragging on the floor, catching her feet up but she didn't have the energy to fix it. Narcissa stopped and a door opened. Meri didn't even look into the room before she stepped into it. As soon as she heard the door close, she collapsed on the plush carpet and welcomed blessed unconsciousness.

She felt as if she had slipped into the pensieve, that feeling of being someplace that you're really not physically present. As things slowly came into focus, she realized with a jolt that she was in Godric's Hollow. But judging from the four men sitting around the table, not her time's Godric Hollow but rather the one she had spent so much time in up until a few months ago. She tried to speak but nothing came out, all she could do was watch.

James was standing at the head of the table, Remus and Peter were seated beside each other and Sirius was sprawled out on the opposite side of the table. Peter had leaned over to Remus and was whispering something so Meri went closer to him to hear.

"How are the meetings going?" Peter was asking.

"Pretty well. For muggles they have a good sense about them."

“How long has it been since your last drink?”

Meri watched in wonder as Remus ticked off mental calculations in his head before finally answering, “Three months now.”

Peter smiled and slapped him on the shoulder. “Good for you, mate.”

“Yeah,” Sirius spoke up, “I’m actually running out of things to make fun of you now.”

“What a shame,” Remus responded but Sirius smiled broadly and there was a hint of a grin on Remus’ face. Meri’s throat constricted; they were coming together finally as a strong knit group.

“Alright,” James spoke up and pulled out a roll of parchment, placing it on the table. “Based on what Harry told Peter about the Horcruxes, we’re looking for magical objects that a: Voldemort has an interest in, and b: were in the vicinity when a significant murder took place. Now, I’ve made a list of all the artifacts that Snape had me track down over the last few years because I have a feeling a few, if not all, ended up as Horcruxes.”

“I have a question,” Sirius spoke up. “Why would he be making Horcruxes now? Sure, we’ve been knocking off a Death Eater here and there but nothing significant.”

“There’s rumors of you gathering forces,” a new voice spoke up. All four men pulled their wands and pointed it at the stranger. Meri found herself reaching for her wand but then realized it didn’t matter if she had a wand or not. The stranger stepped forth and pulled back the hood of their cloak.

“Frank?” James said, lowering his wand. “Frank Longbottom?”

Sure enough, Meri realized, it was Frank. He looked thin, tired but very pleased to be standing there. He stepped aside and Alice appeared, smiling broadly. Sirius jumped up and pulled a couple more chairs up to the table but stopped as more people were filing into the small kitchen. Tonks appeared followed by Fred and George Weasley and their mother, who had her arm around a very nervous bushy haired girl.

"She's one of the only muggle born witches that we found," Molly Weasley said. "She's exceptionally gifted. Just," she gave the teenage girl a squeeze, "scared."

"But," the young witch said in a shaky voice, "but I want to help."

"How old are you?" James asked.

"Seventeen, sir."

"She's of age," Peter said. "It's her choice then."

Meri watched as the briefest flicker of grief passed across her brother's face. "You're more than welcome here..." he paused not knowing her name.

"Hermione Granger, sir."

James nodded and the newcomers all found places to sit around the kitchen, none of them taking the chance to add chairs magically. Meri felt a swell of hope rise in her chest as she watched the group of eleven people seated around the room, watching James intently as he explained a Horcrux and read off the list of the artifacts that he guessed were actual Horcruxes that needed to be destroyed. She watched as the group was divided up into teams that were to set out to search for particular Horcruxes. Remus and Peter were sent after Helga Hufflepuff's golden cup. Frank and Alice would search out Slytherin's locket. Sirius and Tonks would look for Ravenclaw's set of silver scales. Fred and George were assigned the location a ring with a crest in the center of the stone, James had even drawn out what the crest looked like from memory. That only left two Horcruxes from James' count, one of which they believed to be the giant sized snake that Voldemort had near his person at all times. Since they would have to face off with Voldemort himself to go after the snake the consensus was to leave the snake for last.

"So what's the last Horcrux?" Remus asked.

James took a deep breath. "Snape wore a silver ring on his pinky whenever I had the pleasure to see him. I never got a good look at it

but I'm certain it's Lily's wedding band. I think that's the sixth Horcrux and that's the one I'm going after."

Meri watched as the scene slowly dissolved from her view and intense pain replaced the hope and joy she had felt. Her face felt on fire and she tried to move her head only to have it forced still. It felt as if someone was sitting on her chest. She whimpered and forced her eyes open. Severus was staring down at her with his black eyes, not quite as cold as she remembered them. Her surroundings were slowly coming into focus and she found that someone was sitting on her chest: Severus. She tilted her head back to see Narcissa was the one that was holding her head still.

"You were fighting me something fierce," Severus said, slowly climbing off of her and standing up. She was laid out flat on the floor and she closed her eyes in horrible disappointment. She didn't know if what she saw was an actual glimpse into the alternate time or just a wonderful dream of how she wanted it to be. The second guessing of the vision left an extreme bitter taste in her mouth.

Narcissa was trying to lift her off the floor by pushing up on her shoulder blades but the grief at the situation she found herself in kept her on the floor, nothing more than dead weight. After a few failed attempts to get her on her feet, Narcissa gave up and stood up as well.

"Get up."

Meri ignored Severus' order. He couldn't understand what she was feeling right now. Memory of the events of the duel came back to her slowly and she looked down at her left arm hoping it was all a dream. But the Dark Mark stared back at her from her own arm. She lifted her right hand and ran her fingertips over the slightly raised skin of the mark. She had spent most of her adult life fighting people who bore this mark and now she herself was branded with it. She started to run her fingertips over it again only this time she sunk her fingernails into her skin and scraped them down the hideous tattoo. The pain felt good to her so she did it again and again until she was clawing at her arm like a mad woman.

She was briefly aware of the startled gasp from Narcissa when Meri finally drew blood but Severus seemed oddly unaffected by the action and merely grabbed a hold of Meri's shirt and hefted her to her feet. The sudden movement broke her view of the Dark Mark and when he threw her into an armchair it was enough to jar her back to her senses. Her arm was stinging now from the superficial scratches. There was a dull ache to her face and she could feel the dried blood on her cheeks and forehead. She looked down and found her shirt completely bloodied and some splattering on it on her jeans.

"I need to finished the healing charm," Severus said.

"What are you doing?" Meri assaulted him with her mind. "Narcissa is still in the room, idiot!"

"She knows whose side I'm on. As long as I protect Draco throughout the war, my secret is safe with her."

"Are you sure?"

He physically heaved a sigh. "No."

"I'll return downstairs," Narcissa said. "What should I tell the Dark Lord?"

"Tell him I was tired and am resting," Severus answered.

Narcissa nodded curtly and quickly left the room. Meri looked up at Severus. "How bad is it?"

"Your face?"

"No," Meri shook her head. "I know my face is going to be hellish looking. I meant how badly is your cover blown?"

He frowned slightly. "I'm not sure yet. I know they expected me to be more aggressive towards you. There was some definite disappointment."

"Voldemort's going to know you came to see me, that you helped me."

“Possibly.”

“Sev,” Meri fixed him with a steady gaze, “I know the curse, but I’m not the one that knows the counter curse for sectumsempra.”

He gave brief grimace before responding. “The Dark Lord wants you to return to the Ministry and suffer through the disgrace of being named his daughter and being marked with the Dark Mark. I can safely assume he wants you to look somewhat presentable.”

Meri nodded her head thoughtfully. “You really do think of everything, don’t you?”

“How do you think I’ve stayed alive all these years?”

Meri slouched down in the chair. “I’m tired.”

“Then I suggest sleeping.”

“Are you crazy? I’m not falling asleep in a house filled with Death Eaters and Lord Voldemort. What do you think I am, suicidal?” She noticed his dark eyes glinted strangely and she wondered what he was thinking but once again, his mind was shut. After giving her a hard look, he finally spoke.

“It will be safe to sleep tonight, I promise.”

Meri still felt skeptical about that, caught between her instinct of survival and her wanting to trust Severus. It must have showed on her face, for she too had closed her mind. Severus motioned across the room.

“Go get cleaned up and get some sleep. I’ll stay in here if it’ll make you feel better. Everyone will think I just want to keep an eye on you to make sure you don’t try to escape or...” he paused, “hurt yourself.”

She suddenly had a sense he knew exactly what had happened in her sixth year although everyone thought she was just sick for a few weeks when she was really recovering from her botched poisoning attempt. The only people that knew the truth were all dead now. Except for Dumbledore’s portrait. “He told you?”

“Who?”

Anger flooded through her. She didn't care that she was being kept in the enemies house, surrounded by only those who wished her harm except for the man in front of her. She raised a finger to point at him and noticed her hand was shaking. “You know who! Dumbledore in that damned portrait of his! He told you what happened my sixth year!”

“Yes, he did,” Severus raised his voice to match hers, “because he didn't want a repeat performance!” He pulled his wand, swished it angrily at the door and the muffliato charm was cast.

“Out of everyone in the Order, he wanted you to watch over me?”

Severus gave her a half sneer. “Apparently, he did.”

Meri stood toe to toe with him. “You'd rather see me dead, wouldn't you? I could slit my wrists and you'd watch me bleed out!” Severus' face blanched and Meri realized the mistake she had made. He may have hated her brother but he had never shown that kind of hatred towards her. “I'm sorry, Sev.”

“You want to kill yourself,” he stepped away from her, “you go right ahead.” And he turned on his heel and left her alone in the room. Meri couldn't believe she had been so stupid to say something like that to him. She had heard his mother had committed suicide the day after he graduated from Hogwarts. She never heard how, she never really cared to know how Eileen Snape chose to leave this world. She tried to contact him mentally but he would have nothing to do with her at the moment so she went into the bathroom to clean up.

She hardly recognized herself when she was assaulted with the image in the mirror. Her face was mottled with dried blood and there was an angry, semi-open gash that ran from her right temple to her left jaw line. She could tell Severus hadn't completed the healing charm and she could hardly imagine what the injury looked like before he had started with the healing process.

Filling up the sink basin with warm water, she cleaned her face off as best as possible and could see bruises that were starting to appear.

From the look of things, her entire face and neck would be black and blue by the morning. She touched the edge of the gash on her face and her eyes became fixed on the reflection of the Dark Mark. It unnerved her to no end that the vile image had been scorched into her flesh.

The Prophet was most likely being printed right now for it's morning distribution and she was almost certain what the headline would read. "Meriam Potter, Head Auror and Aunt to the Boy Who Lived, found to be the Dark Lord's daughter." She hung her head in defeat knowing that her place in the Ministry as well as the Order would be suspicious, forget the fact that her family secret was now out in the open.

Her eyes fell on a crystal goblet that was sitting on the sink next to a decanter of water. Meri picked up the goblet and turned it in her hands. It was real glass, multifaceted and hand cut. There really was nothing else for her to do now that her loyalties would be called into question. Harry was finding the Horcruxes which meant he would find ways to destroy them. He had survived this long without her help, he would continue on without an issue.

She felt the goblet slip from her fingers and watched in fascination as the glass splintered on the tile. It wasn't a razor but if she could find a sharp enough piece, it would be just as good. She had just picked up a good candidate for what she wanted to do when a loud crack resounded in the room. Meri straightened up and peered around the doorway of the bathroom. A house elf with a tray of food was standing near the bed. Meri slipped the piece of glass she had into her jean pocket.

"I brought you some food, miss," the little creature said, setting the tray of food down on a low table. "Is there anything-" then she noticed the broken glass on the floor of the bathroom. "Oh, my, I'll clean that up right now."

"You don't need to," Meri said but the elf had already started cleaning up the shards. After the floor was clean again and the elf produced another goblet, she disappeared back down to the kitchens. Meri could smell the food tantalizing her from the bedroom but her

stomach was twisted into knots. Instead of sleeping or eating, she sat down on the floor of the bathroom and pulled out the salvaged piece of glass. She kept turning it over in her fingers until she fell asleep.

It was yet another cold night out in the middle of some forest that he had no idea where it was located. They had had a falling out and Ron had disappeared out into the darkness. They didn't know where he was or if he had made it back home. Harry had sent his aunt a couple letters telling her the progress that they were making and he hoped she had received them. There was no way she could contact him so he did his best to find old Daily Prophets to see if there was any news concerning her. The last Prophet that they had found did not bode good news. Hermione had brought it to him, looking drawn and pale.

The headline had read that Snape had been run out of Hogwarts and McGonagall was to take over as Head Mistress. But a smaller headline read that Meri Potter had gone missing and no one had seen her since the attempted arrest of Snape and the Carrows. They had tried to find a discarded Prophet in the next two days but they couldn't and he was starting to wonder if they should go back to the Order and find out what to do to help find his Aunt. For all he knew, Snape had killed her and stashed her body somewhere.

He fell asleep at some point that night because that was when the vision came. It had been so long since he had seen into Voldemort's mind that he was actually unfamiliar with the feeling and it took him a moment to realize that it wasn't a dream he was seeing. He could hear Voldemort's high, cold voice but couldn't see him.

"Amicus, if I allow you to deal with Meriam here, it would not be very entertaining. You wouldn't last two minutes with her. Severus, if you wouldn't mind."

Snape made his way in front of Harry and he soon saw his Aunt standing in front of him as well. He watched as the two faced off and started to duel. He held his breath through the duel and noticed the Snape's eyes were glinting strangely as he fought with Meri. After a few moments of fighting, Snape shouted "Sectumsempra" and Harry saw his Aunt's face explode in a shower of blood.

“Harry!”

His eyes flew open and he was staring up at Hermione. “What?”

She looked very disconcerted. “You were screaming. What happened?”

He sat up and rubbed his eyes before putting his glasses on. “I saw Snape dueling Meri in front of Voldemort. She was holding her own until the end. He used sectumsempra and the curse hit her directly in the face. We have to contact the Order. We have to find out if she’s okay.”

Hermione chewed her lower lip. “I don’t think that would be a good idea. I think we should continue to search for the Horcruxes.”

“She needs help. No one knows where she is.”

“Harry,” she sighed nervously, “Voldemort used images of Sirius being tortured to get you to go to the Department of Mysteries. What if this is just another trick to get you to show yourself?”

He had to admit she made a valid point but the desire to not lose yet another family member was so strong. Snape had already killed Dumbledore and he didn’t want his former Potions Master to add another tally to his death count. He gave a tight nod to Hermione and laid back down. He didn’t know how to do legilimency so he just closed his eyes and thought very hard of his Aunt, wherever she may be, and wanted her to know that he was fine and that he didn’t want her to give up.

“I’m fine, Aunt Meri. Don’t give up...whatever you do, don’t give up.”

“Harry!” Meri’s eyes snapped open, her shout for her nephew woke her up. Blinking her gritty feeling eyes, she looked up to see Severus standing over her. Light was shining behind him, signaling it was morning. She tried to push herself up and felt the shard of glass cut into the palm of her hand. She kept her hand over the piece of glass so Severus wouldn’t see it. “What?”

“Get up,” he said. “We’re leaving.”

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Are you acting on Voldemort’s orders?”

A muscle in cheek twitched but he didn’t say anything further.

She rolled the glass under her palm. “Alright.” She waited till he turned his back to her before she stood up and pocketed the piece of the glass. She would see where this new direction went before she completely gave up any and all hope of furthering Harry’s victory over Voldemort.

Chapter Eighteen: The Second Chance

He didn't think it was possible to reach the end of his patience but with two weeks of trying to survive with Draco Malfoy and Meri Potter, Severus had absolutely reached the end of his rope. Between Malfoy's sulking and Meri's retreat into herself, he was running out of time and ideas of how to rectify the problem. Draco was a lost cause and the least important of his problems. All he needed to do was keep the kid alive till the end of the war. That was if he could keep himself alive.

Meri ghosted into the cramped sitting room in yet another muggle hotel. He didn't even know where they were at the moment and hoped it was the same for any Death Eaters that may have been sent to track them. Meri sat down in a rickety chair and tucked her long legs underneath of her.

"How many times has he tried to summon you?"

"How many times has your mark burned?"

She pulled her left arm towards her and pressed it against her stomach. Severus grimaced inside. He should have known better than to mention her Dark Mark. She was already ghostly pale with sunken in eyes and now, due to his careless remark, she seemed even more withdrawn, if that was possible.

"Three times," he answered. "He's summoned me three times. And I daresay, he's not very happy. Voldemort will not take sixteen years of treachery very lightly."

Meri brightened somewhat. "You just said Voldemort."

"I was under the impression that was who we were speaking of."

"Yes, it was, but you said his name. No 'Dark Lord' or 'He Who Must Not Be Named' or anything. You just came out and said it."

He hadn't even realized what he had done but he felt a small rise of victory come to him. "He's no longer my Dark Lord."

She gave him a slight smile. "Good for you."

Severus cleared his throat, uncomfortable with the praise. "We need to get something to Harry."

"What?"

Severus reached down and pulled a bundle from underneath the couch. He unwrapped the worn canvas and held it out to Meri. She took the ruby encrusted handle with a sense of awe.

"It's the sword of Gryffindor. How did you get this, Sev?"

"Dumbledore hid it before he was..." he should have said murdered but he choked on the word. "killed. Before he was killed. I had a fake one made and gave it to Bellatrix to keep in her vault at Gringotts. When I told him that I was afraid I would have to leave my position as Headmaster, he told me to take the sword."

"How have you been hiding it?" she asked, handing it back to him.

He gave her a sardonic smile. "I don't wear oversized robes for no reason. When I came to your room to get you I had the sword strapped to my back under my traveling cloak."

"And with your posture, no one would have thought twice about your back being so straight."

It was the most lighthearted thing that she had said in the last few weeks and it gave him a spark of hope that perhaps she could put the events behind her and move on. But the cloudy, numb look came over her face once again. He sat there and watched her retreat further and further inside of herself for close to an hour. If he wasn't certain that she was so involved in whatever was running through her mind, he wouldn't have tried to infiltrate her mind at all. He just skimmed the surface, picking up the rush of memories that were being shuffled through her mind.

The first one was her and Lily in the Gryffindor Tower. Both girls were in their dressing gowns, Meri had a pleading look on her face while Lily's look thunderous.

“He said he’s going to sleep out there all night!”

Lily tried to look disinterested. “Let him.”

“It was a mistake, Lil. Look, I hate the term just as much as the next witch but it was bound to slip out with the people he has to hang round with.”

“That’s the point, Meri.” Lily’s angry face faded into one of concern. “He doesn’t have to hang round with the people he does. He’s always been interested in Dark Arts and he just refuses to give them up! I don’t know what to do.”

Meri seemed thoughtful for a moment. “Give him an ultimatum. Make him choose. I mean, if he’s willing to sleep outside Gryffindor Tower until you go out there to talk to him, he has to choose you over those morons he calls friends.”

“You think so?”

“Be tough.”

Lily nodded resolutely and disappeared from the room. After a few minutes, she returned and Meri rushed towards her.

“Well?”

Lily swiped at her eyes. “I’m done. I can’t keep trying to come up with excuses.”

“He didn’t apologize?”

“Oh, he tried.” Lily sniffed and wiped her eyes again. “But he won’t leave his friends. I even accused him of hanging out with wannabe Death Eaters and he didn’t even deny it.”

Meri looked crestfallen, as if she was expecting a different reaction from him. “I’m really sorry, Lil. I thought he would come around.”

The scene shifted to her sitting in bed in a brightly painted bedroom. A twenty-something year old Remus Lupin was curled on his side,

sleeping peacefully while Meri was reading a book. Judging from the looks of Lupin's coloring it was the day after a full moon. Even though nothing was spoken in this memory, Severus couldn't help but feel the contentment the permeated the memory.

Just as that memory was quiet, the next one was chaotic. Music, laughter and bright colors assaulted his eyes and he realized with a jolt he was at Lily and James' wedding. Meri and Lupin were dancing to a fast paced song and were making an impressive show of talent. Sirius danced up to them with Lily.

"Mind if I cut in?" Sirius asked Meri and Lupin. Lupin good-naturedly stepped back but Sirius grabbed him instead. Nonplussed by the act, Meri and Lily paired up and danced out the remaining portion of the song, or at least trying to in spite of the fact they were laughing so hard.

Another memory came to the surface and it took place in a small kitchen. Lily was very pregnant and seated at the table with James and Meri. All of them were laughing about something the memory cut out.

"Well," Meri said wiping her eyes and stifling a laugh, "if this little one has any siblings, watch out. When my parents brought me home from St. Mungos, this one," she pointed at James, "tried giving me away to anyone and everyone that graced out front stoop."

James looked indignant. "I was there first!" But then he burst out laughing as did the two women.

The memory shifted but not the location. It was still James and Lily's kitchen and Meri walked in on James and fussy baby Harry. There was shouting in the background and Meri looked annoyed.

"James, would you go out there and separate Peter and Sirius. They're fighting like children! I would have taken them over my knee and spanked them but I'm fairly certain that Peter would cry and Sirius would like it."

James turned a burst of laughter into a cough. "Here, take him. I'll go deal with the other two children."

Meri took the baby Harry who stopped crying the instant Meri had him in her arms. "Hey, kid. You know, you're the best behaved person in this house right now. You know that?"

The baby let out a squeal of laughter and Meri started rummaging through cupboards. "Where does your Daddy keep the fire whiskey?"

The next few memories went by in a blur and he was only able to make the bare essentials: one of her fights with Voldemort...Christmas at Lily and James'...Lupin's proposal...the news of Frank and Alice Longbottom being told to her...her standing in a gown shop in a wedding dress...the grief she felt at losing Lupin...the pain of the Dark Mark being burned into her arm...a piece of glass...

He broke the connection and jumped to his feet. "Give it to me!"

She looked up at him with confusion written all over her face. "What?"

"The piece of glass you have, you took it from the Malfoy's. Give it to me."

The confusion melted and morphed into anger. "You had no right to be in my mind!"

"I have every right to be in your mind right now! You've been wandering around here completely disconnected from everyone."

"Who am I going to connect to, Sev? Draco? An adolescent who doesn't know which end is up right now? Or perhaps you? A man who was trained to have a mental connection with me but refuses and keeps his mind under lock and key! So forgive me for not 'connecting' to anyone!"

"You want to see in my mind," he threatened. "You want to know why it's so important to me that you stay in one piece." Without pausing, he called up the conversation he had with Dumbledore just a few weeks ago, along with another memory that no one had ever had seen before, and with a mental push, shoved them into her mind.

He came back to Spinner's End immediately after his graduation from Hogwarts. He would stay one night before starting an apprenticeship in Diagon Alley at the apothecary. He opened the door and dropped his trunk in the small living room. Maybe he would get lucky and his father would trip over it in one of his drunken stupors.

"Mum? I'm home." He listened for any response but couldn't hear anything. He could have sworn she said she would meet him back at the house after the graduation. He checked the kitchen, which he found empty and then headed upstairs. Both bedrooms were empty which only left the bathroom. The cracked painted door was ajar but he knocked on it anyway.

"Mum? You alright?" The door opened and there she was in the bathtub, floating in red water, her eyes closed like she was sleeping. His father's metal razor floated in the water. He could tell from the grayish tinge of her skin that there was no way to bring her back. A door banged downstairs and he heard his father's voice come up the stairs.

"Eileen! Where's dinner?"

Meri reeled back from the memory, thankful she was already sitting down. She had no idea that was how Eileen Snape had killed herself. It made sense to her why Dumbledore would set him as her protector from herself now. He knew warning signs. He had suffered from it once and wouldn't want to live through it again, even if it was her.

"Especially if it was you."

"Why? You made it very obvious in the past that you hated me."

A variety of emotions played over his face, all of which she could see he was trying to push back and conceal. "I tried. Every time I saw you I thought of James. Both of you were great Quidditch heroes, brilliant in whatever you set your mind to and popular with all your peers. There were even people in my house that spoke of you in glowing terms."

“If I didn’t know any better I’d swear you were paying me a compliment.”

“Don’t get carried away. You want to know why Dumbledore trained us together in legilimency? He did it to protect us. To keep you from killing yourself again and to keep me away from the Dark Arts.”

“Bloody brilliant job we both did.”

Severus held out his hand towards her. “Give me the piece of glass.”

“What’s with all the shouting?”

Meri turned her head and saw a groggy Draco emerging from the bedroom. She needed out. She needed a place to think and just be in silence. She closed her eyes and imagined the little church in Godric’s Hollow. When she opened them, the church doors were directly in front of her.

Without pausing, she pushed her way into the church. Thankfully, despite the fact it was in the middle of the day, the church was deserted. Since the church didn’t have a particular denomination, there was a shallow basin of holy water at the entrance. Meri believed in God but didn’t follow one particular religion. She figured God was limitless, that’s what made him God, so she didn’t think her faith should be limited to one specific school of thought.

She peered into the holy water and was momentarily surprised at the face that stared back at her. The wound had healed into an angry welt that crossed from her temple, down across her nose and over her cheek. Severus told her it would most definitely be a scar. She dipped her fingers into the water just to be rid of the reflection and moved down the main aisle of the church.

Out the stained glass window, she could see Kendra and Ariana Dumbledore’s headstones. Two rows of stones later, she could make out the white marble of James and Lily’s. Tears pressed the back of her eyes and she took in other familiar names: Abbott, Prewett, even Alastor Moody’s parents were buried out there. And those that were represented out there died because of Voldemort, and that wasn’t even the tip of the iceberg.

Her breathing started to become shallow, almost to the point of hyperventilating. The tears that were pushing at the back of her eyes had made their way down her face, with many more following. As she neared the front of the church her knees gave out in front of the altar and crashed down on the old wooden floor.

She was alone and she took advantage of that fact. She sobbed and wailed every time the name and face of one lost came to mind. Frank and Alice Longbottom. Gideon and Fabian Prewett. Marlene McKinnon. Edgar Bones. Dorcas Meadowes. James and Lily. Sirius. Remus. Dumbledore. They were all in the original Order and now they were all gone. How many would have to die this time around? How many more that she called friend would pass away now?

She bowed her head to the floor and continued to weep. Faces of the those who survived the first war swam before her eyes and it was getting harder to breathe now. Hagrid. McGonagall. The entire Weasley family, surely all of them wouldn't live out this war. Mad-Eye Moody. Tonks. And of course, Harry and his friends. She even found herself crying over the dubious fate of Severus and even Draco. Despite the idiocy that came from the boy, he was just another son of a Death Eater that had been brain washed into that way of thinking. So many people...so much at stake.

"I can't..." she gasped, "I can't...do this...alone." She repeated it like a mantra, as if by some miracle, her friends that had supported her all those years ago would suddenly appear. She needed James' teasing, Lily's companionship, Sirius' energy and Remus' love. But she had none of that now. Harry was depending on her to survive but it didn't seem that important. He was a man now. He had been a baby when she was taken from here only to return when he didn't need a protector anymore. Everyone else seemed to have filled the role for her: The Dursleys, Molly, Arthur, Dumbledore even. She would be treading on their territory by taking her position as Aunt. She couldn't even remember Harry calling her "Aunt Meri." She had heard it fall from James, Lily, Sirius and Remus' lips but never from the ones that mattered to her now.

So, it was true. She was isolated and exiled, brought back to a world that didn't need her anymore. It had learned to function without her in

it, just as it learned to move on without any of the dead that had seemed so important to it when they were alive. What was the purpose then of being in existence? Why was she put on earth, in this time as well as the other, if what she did didn't matter when she was gone? Voldemort would die, eventually, and with him, his reign of terror. Why fight? Why lose people that you love? Why go through that sense of pain and grief? The strength of rage pushed her up into a kneeling position as she screamed as loudly as possibly.

“WHY?!”

The large, round stained glass window behind the modest pulpit shattered into a million pieces.

He was all for giving her the privacy she needed to cope with things but when he heard the glass shatter, he knew it was time to intervene. He opened the door of the small church and peered cautiously inside. He wasn't sure what to expect, an attack or finding a dead body. Luckily, he found neither. Meri was sitting on the floor facing the front of the building, propped up on the side of a pew. She looked semi-conscious and half dead.

Severus never entered churches much. He always feared that God's wrath for his sins would strike him dead before he even passed over the threshold. As he was halfway down the aisle now, he had yet to be struck with anything except a sense of foreboding. He wasn't sure how to calm Meri this time. The first time had been merely a fix, a band aid on a critical wound. This needed to be something permanent. The light fixtures started to swing on their own and the other stained glass windows were rattling in their frames. If she couldn't control the severity of her emotions then the whole church was going to come down around them.

He was standing directly behind her and was still at loss of what to do. She was shaking and trembling, he could hear her laboring to draw in air as if her lungs were going through spasms. What did he want when he was raging at the world? When he was reeling from the injustice of a mother who thought her son no longer needed her when he came of age? Of a father who showed more remorse at there

being no alcohol in the house than at his own wife's death? When the sick feeling came over him after torturing another human being because it was expected? Or worse...when he killed a man who he once called friend? Then, it came to him what needed to be done.

He kneeled down behind her and gathered his courage, wishing despite everything that he ever felt, for an ounce of the Gryffindor daring. He couldn't show any second thoughts, any quaver of doubt in his actions. He had to do something he hadn't done in years and that was let his guard down and let someone else in. Dumbledore had trained him to do this with Meri and not once did she betray his trust. Trying not to think too much about what he was doing for fear he would talk himself out of it, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders and held her to him.

She started sobbing even harder and he was afraid he had done the wrong thing and had only made matters worse. But when he started to pull away, her hands grabbed at his arms and held him there. She started muttering things and he leaned closer to her to make them out.

"Don't...leave me...alone," she repeated over and over again through chattering teeth. "Please, Sev...don't leave...me alone."

He had to say the words and mean them. The odd part of it was, he had no trouble meaning them, it was the saying part that caused him pause. But he had to, if he wanted her functional again. He felt something strange twinge in his chest as he realized, he wanted to see her whole again not just so they could continue their fight against Voldemort but because it unnerved on him on every level to see her broken.

"You're not alone." The words came easier to him than he expected. "You're not alone anymore." And he dropped his mental barriers, all of them, allowing her full access to his thoughts and emotions. Her breathing hitched at the onslaught of what he had done but soon she seemed to deal with it and slowly, layer by layer, she opened her mind to him and he felt the full force of her grief.

Finally, she seemed to quiet. Her breathing started to even out and the trembling was easing. He sat there, unmoving, until she relaxed completely against him. He allowed the familiarity of her mind to

settle back into his own. It wasn't long before exhaustion seemed to catch up with him and he realized Meri was already asleep. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at the shards of glass on the floor.

"Reparo."

All the pieces reassembled themselves and the glass panel looked as good as the day it was installed. A dim glint caught his eye though and he found one sliver of glass that remained on the floor. It wasn't colored but clear. It was then that he realized it was the piece of glass that Meri had hidden from him. He left it on the floor and carefully stood up, taking Meri with him. He held her tightly, not wanting to risk a splinching at this point in the game, and concentrated on the back alley behind the hotel. In the next moment, he was gaining access to the emergency stairwell and headed back up to the room, Meri still sound asleep.

He always had doubts in the back of his mind that Dumbledore was merely trying to bridge the gap between Gryffindor and Slytherin by trying to get him and Meri to work together. Perhaps it was, as he said, for them to preserve each other from self-destructive behavior. But he realized now, that their training had stemmed from a desire to see them work towards ending Voldemort's grip on power. And if not end it, then at least put a major dent in his forces. Meri had come back from alternate time. He had come back from being a Death Eater. This was their second chance to finish what Dumbledore wanted them to do.

Chapter Nineteen: The Way Forward

It took some convincing, but Meri finally swayed Severus that a trip to downtown London would be perfectly safe. She had to tell him about the PO box and Harry's letters but now that their mental shields were completely down, she figured he already knew Harry was communicating with her. He offered to keep an eye on Draco while she did this errand so Draco wouldn't know the importance of a muggle post office.

The day was terribly cold, blustery and overcast. She had on a full length wool coat and scarf but the cold was still seeping in through the material. Thankfully the post office was in sight and a wall warmth greeted her when she stepped into the building. A couple of the post office workers gave her some uneasy looks and the few customers gave her a wide berth. She was getting used to seeing her face but others were still put off by her looks. She tried not to let it bother her but was failing.

She opened the door to the box and found a stack of letters waiting for her. Her doubts of Harry needed her or even wanting her around suddenly felt so foolish. If he didn't want her in his life she wouldn't be shuffling through eight letters from her nephew. She locked up her mailbox and headed back out into the cold. There was a small square across from the post office that looked deserted thanks to the cold weather. She had some time and would prefer to read through the letters by herself.

The bench was clear of snow, thankfully, and when she sat down she hit herself with a warming spell. She found the oldest letter and opened it. At first glance she noticed there were three different types of handwriting on this particular letter so she started at the top.

Aunt Meri-

We're all fine, safe and mostly fed. We still have the thing but no way yet of getting rid of it. I wish you could give me some suggestions somehow. Hermione found an old Daily Prophet yesterday and we saw the headline that you had been made Head Auror at the Ministry and Kingsley Shacklebolt was made Minister! We all celebrated as best we could out here. Congratulations and best of luck! Having

survived what you did in the other time makes you the best person for job. Stay safe.

Harry

Then directly underneath his signature were brief notes of congratulations and warnings to be safe from Hermione and Ron. She folded up that letter and slipped it into the inside pocket of her coat. That was a keeper. If a letter was just an update from Harry then she incinerated it but the ones that held something she wanted to hold on to, she kept it. The next one, however, was not just an update.

Aunt Meri-

We just saw a Prophet that said Snape was chased out of Hogwarts (good job!) but it said that you're missing. I hope you're safe and hiding out. I really do. I don't know how you can get in touch with me, but if you have an idea, please do. We're looking for current Prophets now, trying to see if there's been any sign of you. Hermione thinks that it could be Voldemort trying to get me to come out in the open again. I'm afraid there might be truth to that. I hope that your getting these letters and know it's not because I'm scared to look for you. As soon as I can, I'll join in the search. Just stay alive.

Harry

She could tell the handwriting was different from his other letters. All the previous letters were written with a steady, almost bored feeling type of script. This one was written in haste and she could tell his hand was shaking as he wrote it. She had to find a way to let him know she was fine. The guilt and shame over thinking he didn't need her were shoved to the back of her mind as she tried to think of a way to contact him without putting him in danger of being found.

"Meri?"

Instinctively, she slipped all the letters into her coat pocket and stood up, prepared to walk away but the person was close enough to grab her arm of her coat. She turned, with the full intention of getting away at all cost but she recognized Arthur Weasley and all the fight went

out of her. Arthur always gave her the feeling of security she had when her Dad was still alive. She watched as the shock of the scar across her face sunk in and was thankful when he didn't acknowledge it's presence.

"Hi, Arthur."

A wide smile broke across his features and she knew was restraining himself from hugging her. "I can't believe you're standing here! You're alright! Where have you been? What happened? Are you alright?"

"It's a long, unpleasant story actually. How's your family?"

"Doing well, doing well. They're all going to be absolutely thrilled that I saw you today. Why don't you come by the Burrow? I'm headed there now."

Meri instinctively grabbed a hold of left arm. "I don't think I should."

"Why ever not?"

How could she tell him she now sported the Dark Mark without having him question her loyalties? She didn't want to go to the Burrow and in the middle of dessert say, "*Oh and by the way, Voldemort burned his mark into my arm. Please pass the sugar.*" No, she would be better sticking it out with Severus and Draco, coming into the final battle as back up support.

"I really shouldn't, Arthur. I'm trying to stay unnoticed at the moment."

"Why? We still need a Head Auror. Kingsley refuses to fill your position until we heard definite news. He's still at the Ministry," Arthur grabbed her left forearm, "come on, he'll be thrilled to see you again."

Meri wrenched her arm out of his grasp but by doing so, the sleeve of her coat fell back to reveal the tip of the mark. It was all Arthur had to see apparently. She watched his face blanch as white as the snow. She tugged her sleeve down and when she spoke, her vocal cords wavered. "Don't tell anyone, please."

"What happened?"

The question took her off guard. She expected accusations and use of the mark as proof of her changed allegiance. The thought of having the Order believe differently didn't cross her mind. "Like I said, it's a long and unpleasant story."

Arthur looked around the square lot. The number of people was definitely limited due to the weather. "How about I contact Kingsley and we go have a drink, the three of us."

It sounded so tempting but if she was gone too long, Severus would start to worry despite the mental link that allowed him to check in on her well being. But the need to tell the Order what happened, what really happened, was very strong. Perhaps she could even have Severus inducted back into the Order. It would be risky, being the advocate to the man everyone in the wizarding world thought was Dumbledore's murderer. She would have to tread carefully.

"Sure, alright," she nodded. Arthur sent out a patronus that was practically invisible against the snow. Once he was satisfied with its departure, he headed back across the street to the pub next to the post office and Meri quietly followed behind. She knew the pub on reputation only. Despite the closeness to the Ministry, witches and wizards tended to not darken the door. It was known for bar fights and it was difficult for them to slip out of a fight without using magical means. But it was early afternoon, and the rowdy crowd had yet to appear. They had barely settled into a booth in a dark corner when Kingsley made his appearance. Meri noted he was grinning ear to ear and he clasped her hand in a bone crushing grip.

"I knew you were out there," Kingsley said as he sat down with them. "I knew you would make it back. Your office hasn't been touched so whenever you're ready to come back to work, just show up."

Meri fidgeted. "About that, I'm not sure if I can come back." She watched Arthur lower his eyes to the table and Kingsley try to make sense of her words. The only way to see what would happen was to honestly lay everything out on the table. Meri waited until the bartender went into the back before she pushed up her coat sleeve and showed Kingsley. His eyes widened in shock.

"The Dark Mark? How-"

“He burned it into me. Vold-”

Both men jumped in their seats and shh-ed her into silence. Arthur leaned across the table and whispered. “We’ve only recently found out that the Death Eaters have put a tracer spell on his name. That’s how they’ve been finding those who are resisting him.”

“Unfortunately,” Kingsley said, “we’re back to referring to him as He Who Must Not Be Named. Now, you said *he* burned it into your arm?”

Meri nodded. “He said that he wanted me to live through the discredit of my name and lose my position as Head Auror. That, coupled with the smear campaign of the Daily Prophet should throw enough doubt on my character that would cause you,” she motioned to Kingsley, “to remove me from office.”

Arthur scoffed. “The Daily Prophet is rubbish. Any wizard with half a brain knows who’s running the Prophet now is a supporter of You Know Who.”

“Arthur’s right,” Kingsley added. “Besides, they wrote some pretty outrageous things about you shortly after you disappeared. An attempted suicide your sixth year at Hogwarts, how you’ve spent the last sixteen years working to bring You Know Who back into power because you’re actually his child. It’s been reading like a sordid work of fiction.”

Meri tapped her fingers on the scarred wood of the table. She shouldn’t have been shocked that the Prophet had already released that info. The familiar feelings of shame and despondency came to the surface of her mind but she thought of the letters in her coat pocket and it dissipated...mostly.

“Meri,” Arthur said, stirring her from her thoughts, “They’re not right, are they?”

She took a steadying breath. “I’ll be honest, some of it is. The suicide attempt came after I found out my...questionable heritage, which the Prophet did get correct.”

Both men settled back into the booth, taking in the news. While silence hung between them, the grungy looking bartender came over to them and slid three pints in front of them.

“You want anything to eat?”

All three of them shook their heads and the bartender left them with a satisfied grunt and the silence came back. Meri tried to wait it out but the quiet became terribly oppressive and she moved to stand up. “I’m sorry, I’ll just go.”

“Nonsense,” Kingsley snapped. “Sit down. I daresay, this revelation is shocking but it also explains the great amount of effort you put into finishing off He Who Must Not Be Named when he first came into power.”

“Besides,” Arthur continue, “No one in the Order is going to hold this against you. We know you too well, from before you disappeared and then from what Harry told us of the other time. So, where have you been for the last two weeks?”

Well, she promised herself she was going to be honest with them all. “I’ve been traveling around with Snape and Draco Malfoy.”

Arthur picked up his pint. “They may hold that against you.”

Meri looked over at him to see his was grinning over the rim of glass. “Does anyone know that he’s on our side?”

Kingsley laughed shortly. “Snape? If he is on our side, he has a very strange way of showing it. What with killing Dumbledore and all.”

She wasn’t sure if it was her place to tell them that the details of the so called murder but then she remembered it was Dumbledore that had spilled her secret to Severus so she chalked it up to making things even between the two of them. “The murder was prearranged.”

Arthur and Kingsley looked at each other before turning their attention back to her. She took it as permission to continue when they kept their silence. “Dumbledore was suffering from a fatal hex. Severus was able to contain it, hence Dumbledore’s withered hand, but in the

end it was going to be fatal to him. Dumbledore wanted Severus to remain in You Know Who's graces for as long as possible. Also, the task of assassinating Dumbledore had been given to Draco Malfoy and Dumbledore didn't want the boy to have that act on his conscience. Dumbledore asked Severus to kill him when the time came."

"Why would Dumbledore want to die?" Kingsley asked.

"Unlike most people, Dumbledore didn't fear death."

Arthur nodded. "I remember he called it 'the next great adventure.'"

Kingsley leaned forward across the table. "But Harry said that Dumbledore was pleading for his life before Snape killed him."

Meri remembered the feeling she had when she witnessed the murder. Seeing it from Severus' point of view allowed her access to his emotions at the time and he had been a roiling fury of anger, indecision and grief. "Dumbledore knew that Severus didn't want to do it. He wasn't pleading for his life. He was pleading for Severus to go through with it."

She could tell from the looks they were giving her that they found this hard to believe. It bothered her to see other people question what Severus had put himself through to carry out Dumbledore's wishes. But she had to remind herself that they didn't have direct access into his mind. They don't know what lies beneath the cold exterior and snappish comments. "Alright, look," Meri laid her hands palm down on the table. "This is very easily proved as Dumbledore's portrait hangs in the Head Mistress' office."

Arthur nodded his head thoughtfully. "She has a point. We can always send a message to Professor McGonagall to see what the portrait has to say."

"Make sure you tell her to tell Dumbledore that Severus is no longer a spy for us. He had to leave You Know Who's service in order to get me out alive."

Kingsley looked thoughtful but still slightly perturbed. "He really risked life and limb to get you out of Death Eater's clutches?"

"Me and Draco Malfoy."

"I would never have guessed he had it in him. We all thought he never reformed," Kingsley said. "We all wondered what great song and dance he gave Dumbledore that convinced him of Snape's remorse."

Arthur cleared his throat. "You wouldn't happen to know now, do you Meri?"

"I do but it's not my story to tell."

"But if we ask him, will he tell us?" Arthur pressed.

Meri smiled slightly. "I highly doubt it."

Kingsley gave her a semi-strict look. "How do you know he's being honest? That this just isn't part of the game to get back into the Order and then turn on us?"

"Dumbledore trained us both in legilimency to the point that we can actually communicate with each other across a decent amount of distance. In short," Meri continued, "we can have no secrets from each other. If you trust me, you can trust him."

Kingsley gave her a very hard look. "And we can trust that, if Dumbledore can attest to the truth of his apparent murder. If Snape's loyalties change then you will tell us."

"If his loyalties change," Meri said very seriously, "I'll most likely be dead."

Arthur looked uncomfortable. "You're really willing to put yourself in league with Snape? You really think he's innocent?"

"Of murdering Dumbledore, yes."

Kingsley stood up from the table. "I'll go out back and send word to Professor McGonagall. It shouldn't take too long, classes are out for the day by now."

Meri watched him leave and then picked up her pint and took a big sip. "That tastes good."

Arthur smiled at her. "Haven't had much time to relax?"

"You have no idea how hard it is to stay out of the Order's way as well as run from Death Eaters. You Know Who has not taken Severus' defection very nicely."

"So he really has defected?"

Meri rubbed her left arm. "Our marks burned three times in the last two weeks and he failed to show. Coupled with my and Draco's disappearance, it doesn't take much to put two and two together."

"So what have you been doing these last two weeks to stay out of sight?"

"Muggle hotel hopping mostly. Ever once in awhile I would sneak out and grab some food from a convenience store. Thankfully, Narcissa had enough foresight that when she gathered clothes and things for Draco, she put enough in for Severus and me as well."

Arthur choked on his beer. "Narcissa? Narcissa Malfoy?"

Meri nodded. "No one has a clue that she helped us. I doubt even Lucius knows she helps us. Her only goal is to see Draco survive this. I guess that's how any mother would feel. It's how I feel."

Arthur started to say something but was interrupted when Kingsley came back into the pub. He slid back into his seat and nodded. "Minerva confirmed the story. She also said that Dumbledore wanted us to tell you, 'now we're even.'"

Meri grinned. One secret for another. "Yes, now we're even."

Arthur stared into his glass. "So, Snape is on our side. Dumbledore was right to trust him then."

Kingsley folded his hands on the table. "Meri, your position at the Ministry still stands. You're welcome back whenever you want to come."

"What about the Daily Prophet?" she asked.

"What about it?" Arthur spoke up. "Anyone who knows you isn't going to believe what the Prophet has to say."

"Arthur's right, Meri. It's been made very obvious who's in control of that publication. The Ministry has separated itself from the Prophet."

It was definitely something to think over. She would love to show Voldemort that what he did to her didn't matter in the least. That the Order had something that bound them together, something that he would never have with his circle of Death Eaters: trust. But she didn't want to abandon Severus and Draco at this time. Severus had been left holding the short end of the stick for as long as she could remember and she had tried not to be one of those people handing it to him. She wasn't about to start now. "I'll think it over."

"Wonderful," Arthur said cheerfully. "Now, how about you come to the Burrow tonight for a decent meal. It looks like you haven't eaten anything in over a week."

Here was the test of trust. "Just me?"

Arthur looked slightly put out but he recovered fairly quick. "Just take precautions with Draco. I think it's safe to assume he may not be on our side. But yes, you and Snape are welcome."

"You've got to be kidding."

Meri shook her head, her black curls bouncing around her face. Severus noted her hair was slightly longer now than when he had first seen her, ironically, at the Weasley homestead. "Are you really going to turn down a home cooked meal?"

"No," Draco answered immediately. "Where are we going?"

"That," Meri answered, "you're not going to know."

Severus pointed at Draco, "You stay here." Without saying anything else, he grabbed Meri's arm and shoved her out of the door, slamming it shut behind him. He cast a silencing spell on the door and turned to look at Meri. They were standing under a flickering hallway light and it gave her shocked features an eeriness.

"What?" she asked, crossing her arms in front of her. "We finally get the kid to agree to do something with us and you've got your nose all bent out of joint. What's going on?"

He tried to reign in his annoyance over the matter but decided to let some of it leak through his tone. "You told them about Dumbledore's murder."

"And cleared your name. Or did you like being on the outs with the good guys? The same side you happen to be fighting for?"

"You had no right to tell them anything."

"What are you afraid of? The possibility of them accepting you?"

"The possibility of them lynching me."

She gave him that annoying little Potter smirk. "You really have trust issues. Don't you think I would have scanned their minds to see if this was a set up to harm you?"

Her response left him speechless, not a small feat. The truth was, he had been certain she would scan their minds but had chalked it up to being too optimistic of the situation. Why would they accept him back into the fold after they so strongly hated him for the last few months? How could he walk into the Weasley's home and not feel the distrust coming off of everyone in the Order in waves?

"Hey."

He came out of his thoughts to find Meri standing directly in front of him, her hand on his arm. The closeness felt suffocating. "What?"

"You think too much. Besides," she thankfully stepped back and reached into her coat pocket, pulling out an envelope. "I've found a way to get the sword to Harry."

"How?"

"Harry's last letter said that Ron left them after a row. He's not at Hogwarts which means he could only be at the Burrow. We give him the sword and when he goes back to Harry and Hermione then they will have access to the sword."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. "The sword needs to be taken in an act of bravery. Returning back to his friends after he abandoned them is not brave."

"As a matter of fact, Sev, it is. Admitting a wrong and asking forgiveness takes a great amount of bravery. Just like it's going to take a great amount of courage for you to walk into the Burrow tonight."

He tried to come up with an argument but couldn't. She made perfect sense and it was the perfect opportunity to pass the sword along to make sure it would get to Harry. He really hated it when she was right.